STREET & SMITH'S

WILD WEST WEEKLY

10¢

JUNE 10
1939

OUTLAW'S WHELP
complete novel by
CHUCK MARTIN

also

JOHNNY FORTY-FIVE
complete novelette

Missing Inner Front Cover

Be a Radio Expert

Many make $30 $50 $75 a week

I will train you at home for many Good Spare Time and Full Time Radio Jobs

J. E. SMITH, Pres., National Radio Institute
Established 25 years

He has directed the training of more men for the Radio Industry than anyone else.

Radio offers you many opportunities for well-paying spare time and full time jobs. And you don't have to give up your job, leave home or spend a lot of money to train to get these jobs—to become a Radio Expert.

Get Ready Now for Jobs Like These

Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay well for trained men. Fixing Radio sets in spare time pays many $200 to $500 a year—full time jobs with Radio jobbers, manufacturers and dealers as much as $30, $50, $75 a week. Many Radio Experts open full or part time Radio sales and repair businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, in good-pay jobs with opportunities for advancement. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio, loud speaker systems are newer fields offering good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises to open many good jobs soon. Men I trained have good jobs in these branches of Radio. Read how they got their jobs. Mail coupon.

Why Many Radio Experts Make $30, $50, $75, a Week

Radio is young—yet it's one of our large industries. More than 28,000,000 homes have one or more Radios. There are more Radios than telephones. Every year millions of Radios get out of date and are replaced. Millions more need new tubes, repairs. Over $50,000,000 are spent every year for Radio repairs alone. Over 5,000,000 auto Radios are in use; more are being sold every day, offering more profit-making opportunities for Radio experts. And RADIO IS STILL YOUNG, GROWING, expanding into new fields. The few hundred $30, $50, $75 a week jobs of 20 years ago have grown to thousands. Yes, Radio offers opportunities—now and for the future!

Many Make $5, $10, $15, a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

The day you enroll, in addition to our regular Course, I start sending Extra Money Job Sheets; show you how to do Radio repair jobs. Throughout your training I send plans and directions that made good spare time money—$200 to $500—for hundreds, while learning.

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Money Back Agreement Protects You

I am so sure I can train you to your satisfaction that I agree in writing to refund every penny you pay me, if you are not satisfied with my Lessons and Instruction Service when you finish. A copy of this agreement comes with my Free Book.

Find Out What Radio Offers You

Act Today. Mail the coupon now for "Rich Rewards in Radio." It's free to any fellow over 16 years old. It points out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television; tells about my training in Radio and Television; shows you letters from men I trained, telling what they are doing and earning. Find out what Radio offers YOU! MAIL COUPON in an envelope, or paste on a postcard—NOW!

J. E. SMITH, President
Dept. 9FD, National Radio Institute
Washington, D. C.

Broadcasting Stations

Employ managers, engineers, operators, installation and maintenance men for fascinating jobs and pay up to $5,000 a year.

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Fixing Radio sets in spare time pays many $5, $10, $15 a week extra while learning. Full time repair pays as much as $30, $50, $75 a week.

Loud Speaker Systems

Building, installing, servicing and operating public address systems is another growing field for men well trained in Radio.

HERE'S PROOF THAT MY TRAINING PAYS

$50 Monthly in Spare Time

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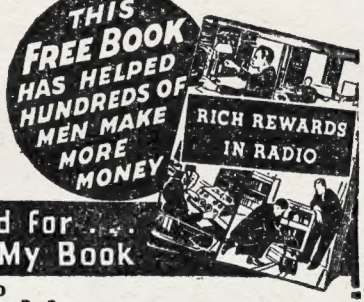
"I have a position with the Los Angeles Civil Service, operating the Public Address System in the City Hall Council. My salary is $170 a month." R. H. ROOD, R. 136, City Hall, Los Angeles, Calif.

WW—1F



This Coupon is Good For ... One FREE Copy of My Book

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 9FD
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send "Rich Rewards in Radio," which points out the spare time and full time opportunities in Radio and explains your 50-50 method of training men at home in spare time to become Radio Experts. (Please Write Plainly.)

NAME..... AGE.....

ADDRESS .....

CITY..... STATE.....

STREET & SMITH'S

WILD WEST WEEKLY

FOUNDED 1902

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A Chat with the Range Boss

THOSE o' you who've been askin' fer longer stories in 3W will find somethin' to yore likin' in Chuck Martin's latest yarn, "Outlaw's Whelp," startin' on page nine o' this issue. An' I'm kind o' figgerin' thet the rest o' you—them as ain't been askin' fer longer stories—will find the "Whelp" plumb interestin', too. I know *I* did, which same, o' course, is why yo're seein' it today. I'll be lookin' forward to hearin' what you readin' hombres an' gals think about it.

I was hopin' to have another one o' Chuck's interestin' letters this week, but I reckon thet ol' word-wrangler has broke down or somethin'. Ain't heerd from him fer quite a spell. Hope he didn't go an' git tangled up with Emmett Dalton's ol' six-gun. But I don't reckon he did. Chuck has a lot of sympathetic understandin' o' lead-chuckers.

Our ol' pard, Emery Jackson, has come through ag'in this week, too, with another yarn about the Whistlin' Kid. Thet young range detective is shore one popular hombre with the readin' hombres. An', like real cattle dicks, he's plumb popular with the honest ranchers. Yuh know, there's plenty of gents like him operatin' throughout the West.

Some time ago I wrote to the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers' Association, at Fort Worth, Texas, fer some dope on these hombres. Here's the answer I got:

This Association, by way of historical reference, was organized in February, 1877, and has employed regular paid brand inspectors since the spring of 1883, having at this time thirty-one inspectors on the markets and in the field. We employ additional part-time inspectors in those sections having heavy spring and fall movements.

Unlike the brand service of New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and some other Western States, in Texas this is not a part of the State government, and our inspectors, therefore, have no special authority. Therefore, there is no occasion to furnish them with special badges. For those who desire it State Ranger commissions are secured. These are our special investigators. Others are given deputy sheriff commissions and carry "John Doe" warrants, which entitle them to carry a gun in any part of the State.

There is a Ranger badge sold by private concerns, but a Ranger is not required to wear one.

The acts of our inspectors are seldom, if ever, questioned in the holding of any number of cattle and the proceeds thereof. We consider ourselves very fortunate in the selection of men in the past who have not abused this reputation built up over all these years.

Our inspectors in west Texas are also special inspectors for the Cattle Sanitary Board of New Mexico—a State office. Governor Alfalfa Bill Murray once furnished one of our inspectors with a blanket authority commission letter in Oklahoma.

"His First Saddle," on page sixty-one o' this issue, brings another ol'-timer back to the 3W corral. I mean Stevie Payne. Like the "Hinges Hollister" yarns by Phil Squires, this story about Pole Pickett—and the others thet are goin' to follow it—is illustrated by thet Señor Wert. Speakin' personal,

I allus git a big kick out o' them drawin's o' his. Specially the expressions he gits on the faces o' hosses, cows, an' other critters. Here's hopin' yuh like Pole.

After roamin' around off the reservation fer too plumb long, Johnny Forty-five, the rhymin' depity marshal, an' his fat pard, George Krumm, are parkin' their soogans in the 3W bunkhouse this week. Andrew A. Griffin has rigged up plenty o' trouble fer 'em in "Johnny Forty-five Shoes A Hoss," startin' on page ninety-five.

Now let's take a look at some o' the letters thet've been comin' in from the readin' hombres. I'm glad to say thet the number of 'em is increasin' every day. They're plumb welcome, an' I only wish I had the space to print 'em all. As 'tis, I'm allus in one durned tough spot tryin' to figger out which ones to print. Howsomever, here's the ones I've picked this week:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Six years ago, on my way to Amarillo to argue a case before the Court of Civil Appeals, I stopped off a few minutes at Cowtown (Fort Worth) and asked the operator of a newsstand for something interesting to read. A traveling salesman was standing near and said:

"Friend, let me suggest a magazine with all stories short and to the point—Wild West Weekly."

I bought one, and since that time, scarcely a week has passed without my reading W. W. W. It is not only a diversion, but really is instructive, with good lessons of honesty and square-dealing with your fellow man.

Yours is without doubt the greatest of all Western magazines; so do not make the mistake of running "book-length novels." You bring the same characters back from week to week, but that doesn't make the stories serials. That is a good idea, and I hope you won't change.

The fellow who started the stories about "The Law West of the Pecos," Judge Roy Bean, just about stole my show. In fact, I have written a few stories, intending to send them in, but after reading them over and over again, they seem pretty much matter-of-fact. I do not believe I have the imaginative mind along this line. However, I enjoy reading yours.

Very truly yours,

A. A. GARRETT

Tyler, Texas.

Thanks fer a plumb interestin' letter, amigo. I shore hope thet our new six-part book-length novel—"Tie-down Johnny's Gunsmoke Trail," by William F. Bragg—the second part o' which appears this week—won't cause you to change yore mind about 3W, lessn it makes you like it even better.

Now here's another one:

DEAR BOSS: In your March 25th issue you ran a story called "Sonny Tabor Wins A Pardon." On the cover you had a picture of Sonny Tabor holding a pardon. The lettering on the pardon said, "State Of Arizona Pardon." Yet in the story itself Arizona is called a Territory. I think the heading on the pardon should have been "Territory of Arizona." What do you think?

Another thing, Boss—why don't you tell us the name of the author of the picture stories about Pecos Wilson? Surely the author of those stories deserves as much credit as the authors of the other stories.

Yours truly,

AUBREY WILLIAMS

Whitemarsh, Pennsylvania.

What do I think about thet pardon business? Why I think yo're plumb key-rect, amigo. Thet mistake shore got by me, the artist, an' everybody else. Them things will happen, now an' then, spite of all an hombre kin do.

I'll talk to the author o' the Pecos Wilson stories, too. He's kind of a bashful cuss, though, so I don't know what he'll say. Howsomever, I agree thet he ought to git credit fer doin' a good job on them picture yarns.

Reckon thet's all fer this week, *hombrecitos*. Be seein' yuh next week with a hull flock o' new stories.

THE RANGE BOSS.

THIS BIG MONEY-MAKING OUTFIT...

Get Started At Once In a Fine Paying COFFEE AGENCY

How would you like to have a fine paying business of your own—a simple-to-run Coffee Agency in which you need absolutely no previous experience and can start with splendid earnings your very first day? Here's your big chance if *you act now. For only $1.00,* I'll furnish your complete business equipment (actually valued at $7.20) containing absolutely everything you need to begin making big money at once.

But don't send me any money now—I just want your name. If you are an active and reliable man or woman—and want to better yourself—want cash to spend, money to save, the means to live in comfort—let me show you your big chance. A dignified Coffee Agency of your own, an all-year-round business, easily managed, requiring no experience, no special skill. Whether you operate part time or full doesn't matter. *And you don't risk a cent.*

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LOOK AT THESE BIG EARNING REPORTS

Scores of men and women write me about their wonderful cash earnings. Sworn statements show clear cash profits of $50.00 to $100.00 made in a single week. George Cini, of New York, reported $73.00 in one week; H. D. Morris, Virginia, $60.00 in a week; H. R. Swearer, Pennsylvania, $100.00 in a week; S. D. Moran, Sr., California, $19.00 in one day; Phyllis Lyons, Minnesota, $50.00 in one week; Mrs. Ella Ehrlicher, Missouri, $85.00 in a week. I don't say that everyone makes that much. Some are satisfied with less. But it shows your big possibilities! Get the free facts. See for yourself.

I SEND EVERYTHING

Any earnest man or woman can make a success as a Food Distributor. In addition to the Complete Display Outfit, with a big assortment of full-sized packages, I also send a simple, sure-fire Plan which anyone can follow. I also send you advertising material, samples to give away, and everything else you need to make good profits your very first day. I guide you and help you all along. You, of course, can get groceries and other household necessities for your own use at wholesale prices—*so you save as well as earn.*

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This is a sincere offer made by an old-established, million dollar company operating from Coast to Coast, and noted for square dealing. Begin earning at once. Unless you make a trial you'll never know what fine profits may be waiting for you as owner of your own Coffee Agency. Strike out for yourself—be independent—free of money worries. You don't risk a penny and you have everything to gain by getting the free facts AT ONCE! Mail the coupon or a postcard NOW!

E. J. MILLS, President
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Just Rush Coupon Today!

MR. E. J. MILLS, President
9528 Monmouth Avenue, Cincinnati, Ohio.

Without obligation to me, please send me at once full free facts about how you'll help me establish a simple to run Coffee Agency in which I can begin making splendid earnings at once.

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●

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So the PICTURE PLAY editors decided to start a contest in which readers are invited to tell how a picture helped them solve a problem. More important than beautiful writing is the sincerity of the thought behind the letter. For winning letters each month, PICTURE PLAY is giving away splendid prizes that you will want.

For all details on this contest, and sample letters, get your current issue of

●

Picture Play

NOW ON SALE AT ALL NEWSSTANDS

OUTLAW'S WHELP

By CHUCK MARTIN

Author of "Rawhide Runyan—Trigger Terror," etc.

A cloud of banditry lay black across his father's name—and the only light that could pierce it was the ravening flame of man-killing guns.

OUTLAW'S WHELP

By Chuck Martin

CHAPTER I.

A JOB AT FIGHTING PAY.

AS he rode down the main street of Estrella, Star Smith knew that he was being observed closely. The little Texas cattle town seemed vaguely familiar with its plank sidewalks and rough tie rails. A large sign hung from a building in front of him, and the cowboy felt a peculiar prickling at the back of his neck when he read the words in letters two feet high:

LOOKOUT SALOON

Across the street on a corner stood the Estrella bank. The sheriff's office was farther down in the middle of the block, and the cowboy stopped his big bay horse and swung down in front of the saloon. He made a slipknot in his hair rope to anchor the bay, and both hands slipped easily across the ivory grips of his twin guns.

His blue eyes narrowed when he saw a big man watching him from under the straight brim of his flat-crowned hat. Star Smith stiffened for an instant before he jingled his spurs across the boards and shouldered through the swinging doors with a shrug of his broad shoulders. A pale-faced bartender with black hair greased down over one eye saluted with his left hand.

"Yours?" he asked from the corner of his hard mouth.

"Small beer," the cowboy ordered briefly.

"You want a chaser with it?" the barkeep grunted.

"Draw the beer and chase yoreself," Star Smith barked shortly, but the blue of his eyes began to smolder.

The bartender walked to the middle of the bar and drew one. He slid the beer down the smooth mahogany where it stopped within the cowboy's cupped hand. Star Smith grinned and raised the glass to his parched lips. He watched the mirror in the back bar while he sipped slowly.

The big man had stepped inside and was looking him up and down from Mexican rowels to battered black Stetson. Star Smith finished his beer and turned. He lowered his eyes and stared deliberately at the big man's polished boots, then raised his head slowly and checked every detail.

The tall man wore broadcloth pants over the boots. He had an embroidered vest with a pearl pin through the silken scarf at his throat. One gun was belted high under the frock-tailed coat, but Star Smith smiled knowingly when he detected a bulge under the big man's left arm.

He knew that bulge represented a hide-out gun in a Wes Hardin shoulder holster. A tinge of gray showed at the big hombre's temples under the straight-brimmed hat. Smith measured his age at about thirty-five, and then he found himself look-

ing into a pair of piercing black eyes.

"Stranger, ain't you?" the big man asked softly.

"In some places, I am," the cowboy grunted. "Is there any law agin' it?"

"He's a ringy cuss, boss," the bartender put in suddenly. "Mebbe he's looking for work."

Star Smith made no answer. His eyes locked with the big man's and refused to turn aside. Three or four men along the bar shuffled their feet uneasily, but the cowboy remained undisturbed.

"I'm Boss La Verne," the big man announced suddenly. "Can you use both hands, or do you just pack that double set of hardware for show?"

Star Smith set his teeth and tried to keep the angry color from flaming in his tanned cheeks. His eyes narrowed to steely points, and then he shrugged carelessly and turned his back.

"One small beer," he said to the bartender.

"We're fresh out of beer," the bar dog answered, and reached to the back bar for a pair of whiskey bottles.

Star Smith dropped both hands and fanned with his thumbs. Flame and thunder crashed deafeningly, and the bartender stared stupidly at the necks of the bottles in his gripping fingers. The cowboy turned swiftly, sheathing his smoking six-guns with the sure ease of long practice.

"I can use both hands," he said to Boss La Verne, and then spoke to the bartender over his left shoulder. "Draw a small beer!"

"Draw one, Blackie," La Verne told his bartender. "You heard the gentleman."

His voice was smooth and unruffled, and there was just the suggestion of a smile on La Verne's dark face. Blackie dropped the bottle necks and hurried down the slippery catwalk behind the bar. He drew one and slid it expertly, and Smith was drinking slowly when the doors opened from the outside. A tall lean oldster was crouching low behind a cocked .45, and he frowned when he saw Boss La Verne watching the cowboy.

"Shooting firearms in town don't go here," the newcomer clipped authoritatively. "Who done it?"

La Verne twisted a thumb to indicate Star Smith. "Cowboy in town," he explained quietly. "He didn't know any better, Crag. He was just showing me that he could shoot with both hands, and that he could hit what he was shooting at. We was talking some about a job."

Star Smith studied the old sheriff in the back-bar mirror. He placed his glass on the bar when Crag Stevens walked up behind him, but he waited until the officer touched his left shoulder.

"The jail is just up the street a ways," the sheriff said gruffly. "Step out in front of me, and keep on walking. I'm talking from behind a full house, so don't try to work any two-handed draw on the law!"

Star Smith turned slowly and started for the door. His hand went to his vest and came out with a silver dollar. Crag Stevens had his gun muzzle buried in the flat muscles of the cowboy's back until the silver hit the bar. Then he grunted and herded his prisoner through the swinging doors.

"That's my horse yonder, sher'ff," the cowboy said in his slow drawl. "You mind if I bring him up to the calabozo?"

"We've got a corral out behind the jail in case you can't pay yore fine,"

the sheriff grunted. "Pull yore macarty, and fetch yore horse along."

The cowboy pulled the slipknot and walked in the dusty street. Crag Stevens kept to the edge of the boardwalk until they came to the jail. Then he stepped out behind Smith and waited until the horse was tied to the rail.

"Inside," he ordered sharply. "I'll sit on yore case myself, account of the justice being away."

"Looks like you're a man of parts," the cowboy said, grinning, and stepped inside the office.

He stopped suddenly when a pretty girl jumped up from behind the sheriff's desk. Her hair was black, with eyes nearly as dark, and she wore a wool shirt with buckskin divided skirts. Little boots peeped out from the fringed hem, and star spurs chimed softly when she tapped her left foot.

Star Smith swept off his old hat and bobbed his tousled head.

"Beggin' yore pardon, ma'am," he gulped. "I'm sorry if I scared you, bargin' in this way!"

"Bobbie don't scare easy," the sheriff said gruffly. "But I'm glad to see you've got some manners. The same being scarce in these parts like you might have noticed. Now what's yore name and business?"

"Smith," the cowboy murmured. "Just one more cowhand looking for work, and I ain't above signing on to draw fighting pay."

"Smith, eh?" the sheriff sneered softly. "You sure it ain't Jones, or mebbe just plain John Doe?"

"Smith suits me fine," the cowboy answered soberly. "It was good enough for my father, and I ain't wanted so far as I know."

"Dad," the girl interrupted softly, "can I speak to you a moment?"

The sheriff frowned and sidled over to the desk, keeping his old Peacemaker trained on the prisoner. He jerked up his head when the girl whispered something in a voice too low for the cowboy to hear. Then he came across the office and studied the hard face of his captive.

"Five dollars and costs for discharging firearms within the city limits," he barked. "Altogether, that adds up to six eighty. You got the cash in yore clothes?"

Star Smith smiled and kept both hands high. Then he turned to the girl and raised his eyes.

"Just reach into the left pocket of my vest, Miss Bobbie," he said quietly, and stepped toward her. "The sheriff can hold the drop thataway."

Bobbie Stevens smiled, showing deep dimples in her cheeks. She slipped her fingers into the right pocket of his vest, because it was closest to her. The cowboy jerked suddenly, and his voice was thick when he spoke.

"The *left* pocket, ma'am!"

The girl bit her lips and pulled a thick roll of bills from his left vest pocket. She peeled off a ten dollar note from the outside, and returned the roll.

Star Smith nodded his thanks and handed the bill to the watchful sheriff.

"Take six eighty out of this," he drawled. "I'm sorry if I busted the town law, but I didn't know any better."

"That being the case, the fine is suspended," and Crag Stevens holstered his gun. "You said you were looking for work, and you mentioned fighting pay."

"You got a job that answers such a description?" the cowboy asked eagerly. "I can roll 'em, fan 'em, or use one or both for a club!"

"You're a modest cuss," the sheriff grunted. "Would seventy-five a

month and shells tempt you to risk what's left of yore life?"

"Sight unseen, you've hired a man for the job you've got in mind," the cowboy answered promptly. "How far is it out to the C Bar S?"

Crag Stevens glanced at his daughter, and the girl stared at Star Smith. The cowboy was tall and saddle-lean, with the marks of a brush-popper stamped on his worn range attire. There was a soft pur to his speech, something like the voices of the Mexicans down across the border. The sheriff turned to the cowboy with a frown on his weathered old face.

"You ain't so much of a stranger," he grunted. "How did you know I owned a ranch, and how come you to know I needed some gun help out there on the C Bar S?"

"I met a hand coming up from the river," the cowboy answered immediately. "But I didn't know you was the sheriff."

"Now you talk straight, you salty buckaroo," Stevens said sternly. "Boss La Verne offered you a job, and you turned him down. Yet you claim to be a stranger in these parts!"

"Now, say you was a stranger, sher'ff," Smith countered evenly, "after taking a good long look at Boss La Verne like I done, would you go to work for him?"

"I claim to be a right smart judge of men myself," the sheriff evaded. "Which is why I offered you a riding job on the C Bar S. Bobbie is going out there now, and she'll show you the bunkhouse."

The girl stepped close to the cowboy and raised her head to sniff. "Do you drink?" she asked frankly.

"Yes'm, when I'm right thirsty," Smith answered honestly. "There don't nothing seem to hit the spot like a good small beer."

Bobbie Stevens looked at him closely to detect any signs of hoorawing in his face. The sheriff nodded and backed up what the cowboy had said.

"That's what he was drinking down in the Lookout, Bobbie," he told the girl. "I got me an idea that was how Smith come to disturb the peace. When I walked in behind my gun, thinking that some of La Verne's gunnies were jumping another stranger, Blackie Kendall had the broken necks of two whiskey bottles in his hands."

The girl smiled and offered her right hand, man-style.

"My name is Roberta," she said, and her voice was friendly. "Daddy calls me Bobbie for short. He named me after an old pard of his who has been dead ten years."

Star Smith gulped and took her little hand. "He must have been right smart of a man for the sher'ff to name you after him," he muttered. "I'm happy to know you, Miss Bobbie."

"He was the finest man we ever had in Hardin County," Crag Stevens said emphatically. "I was deputy under him when he was sheriff, and a finer man than Bob Rollins never broke in a pair of handmade boots!"

Star Smith stared for a long moment, and tried to wink the moisture from his burning eyes. Then he coughed to cover his confusion, and the sheriff pointed to a water bucket on a shelf behind the door.

"She's pretty dusty riding up from the river," he said. "Wet yore whistle and then fork yore bronc. I'll be seeing you around supper time."

Star Smith drank deeply and wiped his mouth with his neckerchief. His face was calm when he turned again, and he waved a hand

at the sheriff and followed the girl to the street. He paused for a moment when he saw big Boss La Verne in front of the Lookout Saloon, and then he pulled his tie rope and vaulted to the saddle.

CHAPTER II.

STAR SMITH HELPS THE LAW.

BOBBIE STEVENS mounted a deep-chested grulla and headed up the street without a word. Not until they were well away from town did she mention seeing La Verne.

"La Verne is suspicious already," she said in a worried tone. "Be careful of him, cowboy. He has a lot of money, and he owns the Lookout Saloon. The new town law was passed because of the gun fighters who work for him."

A peculiar evasive expression crossed the cowboy's face, and he turned his head to study the rolling range land. The girl glanced down at the twin guns in his holsters, and then she leaned forward when Smith turned his head again to face her.

"By the way, what's your first name?" she asked curiously.

"They called me Star down around the border," the cowboy answered carelessly. "Just a nickname I got because I rode in a couple of posses. Most of the time I was working wild cattle down near Posado."

"I knew a little boy by the name of Star when I was a tiny girl," Bobbie answered slowly, and studied his tanned face. "We were awfully good friends," she added with a sigh.

"What become of the little button?" the cowboy asked carelessly.

"Nobody knows," the girl answered slowly. "He was the son of Bob Rollins, the sheriff under whom dad rode as deputy. The bank was robbed one night ten years ago, and Boss La Verne said that Bob Rollins was the holdup. Bob left town that same night, and was never seen again."

"You mean the sheriff was accused of robbing that bank and lighting out with the loot?" the cowboy asked thinly. "After him being sheriff all those years?"

"Fancy La Verne was one of the witnesses," the girl answered with a nod of her head. "He is Boss La Verne's brother, and Scar Brannigan was another one of the gang. Brannigan and Fancy La Verne trailed the sheriff, and they never came back. Let's not talk about it now."

"This new job of mine," Star Smith murmured, to change the subject. "Are rustlers bothering the C Bar S?"

The girl nodded with a worried frown. "We've lost close to three hundred head of beef this year," she told him. "And several of our winter haystacks have been burned down."

"And old Crag is the sheriff now," Smith murmured thoughtfully. "It don't sound right to me."

"Boss La Verne is a mighty big man in Estrella," the girl said abruptly. "He runs an outfit under the Box V iron, and he wants a new sheriff. One of his men will run against dad at the next election."

"I see," the cowboy answered slowly. "If old Crag can't catch the rustlers who are raiding his own herds, he'd be a mighty poor hand at helping his neighbors. Is that how it tallies up?"

"Dad will explain," the girl answered wearily, and turned into a big ranch yard. "The bunkhouse is over yonder." She pointed to a long building and rode away to the barn.

Star Smith rode to the bunkhouse and dropped his slicker pack and blankets to the ground. A lean old

cowman looked up from the tack room at the corner of the long building. Then he came out and ran an experienced eye over the cowboy and his gear.

"New hand?" he asked sourly. "Light down and read yore brand and ear markings."

Smith smiled and swung to the ground. Bobbie Stevens had told him something of the crotchety old foreman, whose bark was worse than his bite.

"You're Bart Conway, ramrod of the C Bar S," the cowboy answered. "Put me down on the pay roll as Star Smith, at seventy-five a month and grub. Then you can break me out a box of .45 shells for extras."

"Gun-slinger, eh?" the old foreman grunted. "Or else Crag wouldn't be giving you fighting pay. What range you been working here of late?"

"Oh, I've been beating the brush down along the border," Smith answered with a grim smile. "Where at will I unroll my bed?"

"Take that bunk right there at the end," old Bart grunted. "So's you can get up in the middle of the night without waking up the working crew. We run eight men on the outfit, and I'll make you acquainted when they ride in. Yore name is Star, eh?"

"Star Smith," the cowboy agreed, and carried his bed inside the long building.

The old foreman followed and watched all his movements critically. His voice was low when he suddenly spoke with blunt vehemence.

"Yore name ain't Smith," he began tersely. "I was just going to sling a gun on you, but you couldn't noways be working for the Box V from the way you walk about, and the manner you carry them twin six-shooters!"

The cowboy turned with both hands close to his guns. His eyes glittered for a moment, and then he smiled slowly and shook his head.

"I can say the same for you, Bart Conway," he answered quietly. "Boss La Verne couldn't buy an hour of yore time with all his money. I reckon you and me will get along."

The old foreman was looking down at the cowboy's left hand. He stared with his face puckered in a frown, and then he grunted and shook his gray head.

"That's quite a scar you got there where yore rope slipped when you was learning to take yore dallies round the saddlehorn," he remarked carelessly. "Most of the time we tie hard-and-fast down here in south Texas."

Star Smith's mind raced back to the early days of an almost forgotten childhood. He stared at the long scar across two fingers on his left hand. Yes, he remembered how he had received those scars. He had roped a two-year-old steer when he was only ten, and he had watched the steer instead of watching the turn of the rope around his sadlehorn.

"What about it?" he demanded harshly. "I've seen plenty men marked up like that."

"There was another button in these parts better than ten years ago," Conway murmured softly. "His name was Star, account of his old man rodding the law as sheriff. You wouldn't know him?" and he raised smiling blue eyes to the cowboy's hard face.

"Like you said," Smith agreed promptly. "I wouldn't know this other feller!"

"And you wouldn't know an old-timer by the name of Hank Steffins?" Conway continued, without batting an eye.

Star Smith caught his breath and

leaned forward to study the old foreman's weathered face.

Bart Conway smiled and extended his hand, and he pointed to a corral where a bunch of deep-chested horses were eating oat hay.

"A man's business is his own so long as it's honest," he said softly, and now his tone was warm and friendly. "You can use that string of horses yonder, account of we keep them grained for fast work. The remuda finds their own feed out in the river pasture, if you catch on to what I mean."

Star Smith understood. Old Crag Stevens was determined to find out who was rustling his stock, and burning his haystacks. The cowboy pointed to a big Morgan horse.

"That one could go a long ways, and do it fast," he told old Bart Conway. "I'll rope him out and use him first if you've got something special on your mind."

Bart Conway nodded and came closer while he lowered his wind-roughened voice. Then he glanced around the yard to make sure that no one was close.

"That's reading sign, Star," he answered. "Hank Steffins is deputy under old Crag Stevens, and it might be you know that old star-toting gun hand. He rode out there toward the Box V range this afternoon. He ain't showed up yet, and I thought mebbe you'd better start earning yore pay. Here's that extra box of ca'tridges."

The cowboy took the shells and broke the box. Then he filled all the empty loops of his crossed belts, and dumped the remaining cartridges in the pockets of his brush coat. After which he loosed his cinch and pulled the riding gear from his bay. He carried saddle and bridle over to the horse corral and spoke over his shoulder.

"I'll saddle that Morgan and ride on out, Bart. This horse is branded with the C Bar S, in case I meet any of yore riding crew."

"You won't, leastwise none of *our* crew," Conway grunted, and reached inside his little shack. "Put this saddle gun under your fender in case you run across any varmints," he added meaningly. "She's always open season on wolves and such."

Star Smith took the .45-70 Winchester and tried the action to make sure of the loads. The old foreman watched when Smith dumped a handful of shells in his pocket. His eyes twinkled when the cowboy took down his catch rope and snared the big Morgan with a careless backhand cast, and a moment later Star Smith was in the saddle.

"Tell cooky to save me out a bite of grub," he said with a hard little smile. "I'll ride back with that lawman pard of yours if I cut his sign."

"You watch out for old Hank," Conway warned. "He's fast on the trigger, and he will be suspicious of strangers."

Star Smith nodded and rode across the yard behind the barns. He was halfway across the river pasture before he remembered that the only directions he had was a wave of the old foreman's hand. His eyes were scanning the low brush-covered hills, and he nodded when he saw a cluster of huge rocks where Little Wolf River made a bend.

"Doggone," he muttered softly. "That's right where I like to cut off those two fingers the day I roped me that spooky steer. I wonder if that old pelican back there recognized me?"

A warm glow crept through him when he checked back and remembered his meeting with old Crag Stevens. To be trusted was like coming back home, and then Star Smith

remembered that it was Bobbie who had suggested that her father give him a job. Did a man carry enough character in his face to tell folks that he was honest?

His left hand crept down to his right-hand vest pocket and closed over a bright five-pointed star. Bobbie Stevens would have found the old badge when she reached for the money to pay his fine, only he had jerked away quickly. Now old Bart Conway had loaded him for bear, and had sent him riding within fifteen minutes after he had signed on the C Bar S pay roll.

He was across the river pasture when he noticed the ears of his horse prick suddenly forward. He neck-reined instantly into the brush where he stopped the Morgan. He leaned forward to study a little valley opening toward the south. His eyes narrowed when he saw a hogtied steer down in the short grass. A man was bending over the struggling steer, making sure of his ties.

Star Smith's hand went down and drew the Winchester from the saddle boot under his left fender. He was about to ride out for a look when a stern voice cracked from the brush just ahead, and off to one side. In another second he would have been discovered, and Smith eased back when he recognized the ring of authority in the barked command.

"Step back and start reachin', mister!"

The man on the ground slapped for his belt gun as he threw his body to the side. Star Smith heard the crack of a saddle gun just before the stranger triggered a shot from his six-gun. The stranger sprawled awkwardly beside the steer, and lean Hank Steffins came out of the brush with his Winchester at the ready. He was walking in a crouch toward the wounded man, and then Star Smith raised his own rifle.

The brush was moving just beyond the hogtied steer, and the hidden cowboy sighted carefully and slowly squeezed the trigger. Another rifle barked at the same time. Hank Steffins stumbled and went down with the smoking Winchester flying from his gnarled hands.

Star Smith touched his horse with the spurs and rocketed into the clear to race toward the thrashing body back in the brush. He emptied his saddle and hit the ground on his high heels, with a fighting scowl twisting his thin face.

"Come out with your hands high!" he barked. "You law-shootin' coyote!"

The man back in the brush made no answer. Star Smith went in after him, with the Winchester at his hip and ready to shoot. The scowl left his face when he saw the bushwhacker staring up at the sky with sightless eyes. He hooked his fingers in the dead man's jumper collar and dragged him out into the clear. A sharp twangy voice straightened him up before he could turn.

"Drop that long gun, cowboy. Looks like the law caught up with you rustlers, and I'll save expenses of a trial if you try to make a play!"

Star Smith lowered his rifle and turned slowly. Hank Steffins, on his feet again, stared, his jaw sagging. Then he glanced down quickly at the man Smith had just dragged from the brush, and the old deputy swayed weakly and toppled over.

The cowboy was at his side in three long leaps. He caught Steffins by the shoulders, shook him gently, and his voice was hoarse with an unspoken fear.

"Hank, you old law-dog," he growled. "Are you hurt bad, you old raw-hider?"

Hank stirred restlessly and then slowly opened his eyes. He stared at Star Smith until his vision cleared, and then he tried to smile.

"I didn't recognize you at first, Star," he murmured weakly. "I took a slug high in the left shoulder. You got any snake bite on yore saddle?"

Star Smith raised the old deputy to a sitting position, and propped him against a tree. Hank Steffins grinned through the pain that twisted his weathered features.

"I don't nave a drop," Smith muttered. "Where's your horse, Hank?"

"Right back there where I walked out like a fool pilgrim," Steffins muttered drowsily. "You'll find a pint of Three Star in the left saddle pocket!"

CHAPTER III.

BRAND BLOTTERS.

STAR SMITH ran back in the brush and searched the scarred saddlebags. He came back with a flask of whiskey, and pulled the flat cork with his teeth. He held the bottle to the old deputy's pallid lips, and Steffins drank deeply and then sat up with a sigh of satisfaction.

"Just a scratch," he grunted. "Put a plug in the hole and tie it off tight, Star!"

The cowboy stripped back the heavy wool shirt and shook his head doubtfully. A .45-70 Winchester bullet makes a nasty wound, but Steffins growled under his breath. Smith tore a strip from the deputy's undershirt and saturated it with uncut whiskey.

"Here goes," he warned. "Bite down yard on yore teeth, Hank. It might burn you some."

The wounded man nodded and set his lean jaw. Star Smith worked the cloth plug into the wound, after which he stripped the bandanna from his throat and made a tight shoulder bandage around the upper arm. Steffins tipped the bottle again and drank deeply, and his gray eyes were bright when he chuckled and pointed to the hogtied steer.

"That's where old Crag's beef is going," he said to Smith. "Them two rannies ride for the Box V, the outfit La Verne owns. I've suspicioned that big son for quite a spell, just like I told you down there near Posado."

Star Smith turned and studied the steer for the first time. Then he got down on his knees and traced a pair of brands with his forefinger. A frown spread over his face when he shook his head.

"Something wrong here, Hank," he said slowly. "This is a Box V critter, with a new C Bar S brand run right alongside. Who ever done it made a slash through the Box V!"

"The hell you say," Steffins muttered, and drew his six-gun.

The old deputy stared at the two brands, and then the weapon roared. The cowboy felt the steer jerk under his knees. He turned slowly when the animal grunted and fell back, but Steffins shrugged and pointed to a sandy wash across the clearing.

"Pull the hoggin' strings just in case this critter is ever found," he said quietly. "Then flip your loop over the heels and drag the carcass yonder. Boss La Verne meant to frame old Crag, so he had those two men of his drive a Box V steer over here on C Bar S range. Not only that, but they vented out the old brand, and put that new one on with a running iron."

"You mean he wanted to make it look like Crag was running off Box V beef," Smith said slowly, and walked back to get his horse.

"Looky, Star," Steffins explained,

with a catch of his breath. "Boss La Verne is trying to get old Crag out as sheriff. If he could make the folks think that Crag was rustling beef, who do you reckon they would vote for next week?"

"They wouldn't vote for the old man," the cowboy agreed, and flipped his rope.

He dragged the carcass across the clearing to the sandy wash, and snaked it under an overhanging cutbank. Then he dismounted and anchored his horse with dragging reins while he stamped to cave in the bank. A moment later, the steer was buried and out of sight.

"Drag out that track with a branch," the old deputy suggested. "After which I'll tell you some things you ought to know."

Star Smith cleared the telltale tracks and came back to hunker down on his boot heels. Now perhaps he would find out just why the old deputy had persuaded him to ride into Estrella. Steffins took a swig of his bottle and tossed the empty back in the brush.

"It was nearly two weeks ago when I helped you bury your dad down there near Posado on the Mex border," Steffins began. "Him and Scar Brannigan had just shot it out, and the score was a tie."

Star Smith nodded silently. He remembered the duel at the desert waterhole where he and his father had built up a little cattle outfit. Then his blue eyes burned hotly when the picture flashed across his mind.

His father had only one arm—the right shoulder had held only a severed stump. Lefty Smith, he had been known as in Posado just across the Mexican border, and Star Smith had lived in the brush as long as he could remember.

"We buried your dad down there, me and you, Star," old Hank said softly. "But his name wasn't Lefty Smith like you know!"

"He was tagged an outlaw," Star Smith said bitterly. "I was just twenty-one the day you rode down and helped me bury dad. Lefty promised to tell me all about it that very night, but he didn't live long enough!"

Hank Steffins studied the hard young face and had to look away to wink the mist from his eyes. His voice was gruff when he spoke without meeting the cowboy's eyes.

"We found that box in the cave where you and Lefty lived," he reminded. "There was a letter from Bob, and his law badge was under the money we found. Yore dad's name was Bob Rollins!"

"It was Lefty Smith!" the cowboy growled savagely. "And my name is Smith until I clear up that bank robbery!"

Hank Steffins sighed and slowly nodded his grizzled head. He knew that argument would be useless, and he pointed to the tag hanging from the cowboy's vest pocket.

"Roll me a smoke, Star," he requested wearily. "I can think better when I smoke."

Star Smith reached for the makings and rolled the cigarette sullenly. He tucked it in Steffins' mouth and flicked a match under his thumbnail. He was fashioning one for himself when the old deputy spoke again with smoke trickling from his hawkish nose.

"Bob's letter explained about that holdup, Star," he began softly. "Fancy La Verne and the Brannigans held up the Estrella bank. Yore dad caught them just as they were making a getaway, but Fancy shot him out of the saddle. Old Crag Stevens and I were deputies under yore dad, and we found ten

thousand of the money where they dropped it."

"I remember that night," the cowboy answered bitterly. "I wasn't much more than ten years old at the time. Dad routed me out of bed and told me that I could help him. His arm was all shot apart, and he was afraid of passing out from loss of blood!"

"Funny about that," the old deputy answered. "We found his grave down there in Posado. The headboard said that Bob Rollins was buried under the mound."

"Fancy La Verne has laid under that board for ten years," the cowboy contradicted, with a click of his teeth. "He caught up with me and dad right there at that same waterhole where you saw Lefty kill Scar Brannigan. Dad killed Fancy La Verne, and then some Mexicans came just as dad went down from loss of blood."

"Now you take Boss La Verne," the old deputy muttered. "He never did find out what happened to that handsome brother of his. So it was Fancy they buried under old Bob's headboard!"

Star Smith nodded and sucked his lungs full of smoke. "The Mexicans took me and dad to a big ranch down across the line," he explained. "There was an American doctor hiding out there, and he saved Lefty's life when he cut off his right arm. Everybody called him 'Lefty Smith' from then on. We went out there to live where you found that box in the cave, and me and Lefty had the start of a nice little cow outfit."

"Roping wild mavericks back in the brush is top-hand work," Steffins said earnestly. "And then Scar Brannigan rode down there two weeks ago, with me right behind him."

"And he stayed there, with dad," the cowboy whispered. "I came near going back on my promise to you, Hank."

"I knew you would come," the old deputy answered with a smile. "There never was another man like Bob Rollins in Hardin County, and I tagged you for a chip off the old block."

"That's right," the cowboy murmured dryly. "He was tagged an outlaw, and I'm part of the same breed. Lefty made me practice every day with two guns, but he never did tell me why. I reckon I know now!"

"Guessing won't get us anywhere," Steffins said quietly. "Right now you and me are sure that Boss La Verne baited this trap for old Crag Stevens, the sheriff. We've got to have the proof, and that's how come me to get your promise. Wait until you see La Verne."

Star Smith smiled and told the old deputy of his meeting with the boss of Estrella. Steffins grinned when the cowboy came to the part where the sheriff had placed him under arrest. Then his eyes narrowed when he glanced down at the ivory-handled guns.

"Yore dad wore those guns when he was sheriff," he said slowly. "Are you sure nobody recognized that pair of cutters?"

"I think one old rannihan did," the cowboy admitted with a frown. "Bart Conway dropped a hint when he said my name wasn't Smith, but I couldn't be sure."

"Why don't you come out in the open, cowboy?" Steffins asked him quietly. "You'd find you had a heap of old friends."

"You read Lefty's—I mean, my dad's letter," the cowboy said slowly. "I can't take my right name until I've cleared the name of old Bob

Rollins. You know that as well as me!"

"Yeah," the wounded deputy agreed. "Now if you will help me climb that old henskin of mine, we better hit out for the ranch."

Star Smith nodded and went back for the deputy's horse. He almost lifted Hank Steffins to the saddle, but the old lawman set his teeth and stiffened his back when they started across the river pasture. Twilight was deepening when the two men came in sight of the big barns on the C Bar S.

Sheriff Crag Stevens shaded his eyes and stared across the pasture. Then he left the broad gallery on the rambling ranchhouse, and bellowed a call for Bart Conway as he passed the cook shack. The warp-legged old foreman dropped his knife and came out with hand on his gun just as Star Smith rode through the back yard with Hank Steffins.

The cowboy was supporting the deputy with his left arm while he guided the horses with his right. He came up to the two men and spoke quietly.

"Hank took a rifle slug through the left shoulder, boss. I reckon he's lost a sight of blood, so we better get him right into bed and call the doctor!"

Bart Conway called to a pair of cowboys staring from the door of the cook shack.

"Lend a hand here, and stop that gaping!" he barked. "Carry Hank into the bunkhouse, and make him easy in a spare bunk. The rest of you cowhands finish yore supper in case the old man decides to make a hunt tonight!"

The sheriff followed the cowboys into the bunkhouse, and he waited until they had laid Steffins on a low bed. The old deputy was moaning softly, and Crag Stevens turned to Star Smith.

"Who got him, cowboy?" he asked quietly.

"Hank said it was a couple of riders from the Box V," Star Smith explained slowly. "They had a Box V steer tied down, and then they ran a C Bar S on its hide. After that they crossed out their own brand."

"You mean they burned my brand on the critter?" the sheriff barked.

"They did it with a running iron," Smith answered. "But Hank got the brand blotter before he went down."

"You said two of them," Stevens reminded grimly. "What happened to this other brand-blotting hombre?"

The cowboy glanced at Bart Conway with a little smile curling his lips. The old foreman nodded his head before Smith made his explanation.

"The ramrod gave me a saddle gun and sent me out there to meet Hank," he drawled softly. "This second hombre was hiding back in the brush with his sights lined down on Hank. I was watching from the other side, and he didn't see me. I just beat him to the shot to spoil his aim."

Crag Stevens stroked his long white mustache and dabbed at the floor with the toe of one boot. He was thinking the whole thing out, and his voice was thoughtful when he raised his eyes.

"What about the steer?"

"Hank shot the critter, and I buried it under a sandy cut bank," Smith explained. "Then I plugged up that hole in Hank's shoulder and rode on in with him. He ought to have a doctor, unless you want me to fish for that slug."

"I'll fish for it," Bart Conway growled. "Like as not the boss has

other work for you right now," and he stared at the badge on the wounded man's vest.

CHAPTER IV.

THE NEW DEPUTY.

CRAG STEVENS locked glances with his foreman and frowned. His lips set sternly under the white drooping mustache, and then he turned to Smith.

"Those two rustlers you and Hank smoked down," he asked. "What did you do about them?"

"Buzzard bait," the cowboy grunted, and his face was hard. "I was thinking about Hank, and we just let them lay there in the clearing."

"Mebbe you and Hank forgot that they were on my range," the old sheriff said slowly. "What excuse have we got if Boss La Verne finds them there?"

"Let La Verne find an excuse," the cowboy muttered, and then he straightened slowly. "Now look, sher'ff," he said thoughtfully. "They knew they couldn't change that brand and get away with it, so they tried out an old trick. La Verne meant it to look like you bought stock from him, and then put your own road brand on it. When you couldn't show a bill of sale signed by him, he'd sign a warrant charging you with rustling!"

Crag Stevens was chewing one end of his mustache while he stared down at his wounded deputy. He realized how narrow had been his escape from something that would have been much worse than the loss of all his herds. He was proud of his good name, and the record he had made as sheriff of Hardin County, in spite of the ten-year reign of Boss La Verne.

Bart Conway was getting his probes ready to do some rough surgery on Hank Steffins. A cowboy brought a bucket of hot water from the kitchen, and the old foreman turned slowly and spoke to the sheriff over his shoulder.

"Looks like you need a new deputy, Crag," he grunted, and jerked his head toward Star Smith.

Crag Stevens studied the suggestion for a long moment. Then he unpinnined the deputy badge from the wounded man's vest. Watching cowboys narrowed their eyes when they stared at the twin guns on the long legs of the new rider.

"You're drawing fighting pay, so hold up yore right hand," the sheriff barked suddenly at Smith, and began to mumble the oath of office without waiting for a reply.

The cowboy slowly raised his hand with a spot of color burning on his high cheeks. He swore to uphold the dignity of the law, and to honor the name of the State of Texas, to go where he was sent, and to do what his superiors ordered.

"That makes you a deputy sheriff, Star Smith," Stevens said quietly, and pinned the star over the cowboy's heart.

Star Smith was breathing deeply, and staring like a man in a dream. For ten years he had followed the outlaw trails with his father, hiding from the law that would have sent Bob Rollins to prison for a crime of which he and his son were innocent. Now he was a deputy in the same county where Bob Rollins had carried the law, and his mind flashed back to the bearded outlaw with one arm amputated at the shoulder.

"I wonder what Lefty would say," he muttered, without knowing that he had spoken aloud.

"It's the way he'd want it, Star," a weak voice answered him, and gnarled fingers caught his left hand.

"Make good behind that old badge, deputy. One of these days you might be wearing another one!"

The new deputy glanced down and gripped hard when he saw Hank Steffins holding his hand. The cowboy swallowed a lump in his throat, and Crag Stevens slapped him on the back and introduced him to the riding crew.

"I want to make you fellers acquainted with my new deputy," he told them. "Get used to Star Smith, a hard-riding brush-popper from the border ranges."

Star Smith nodded to acknowledge the introduction. Then he turned to the sheriff and spoke softly.

"Hank ought to have a doctor, boss," he suggested. "And what about those Box V rannies out on our range?"

"One of us will have to be in town," Stevens answered slowly. "You ride in and send the doc, and I'll get out there in the river pasture with a couple of the boys. We'll rope those brand blotters on their saddles and bring them in, and you hold down the office until I get there."

"I'll saddle a fresh horse right away," the new deputy answered, and started for the door.

"The cooky has saved you a plate of grub, Star," Bart Conway reminded. "You better eat some hot vittles first."

Smith nodded and hurried to the cook shack. He was wolfing his food hungrily when a soft step sounded from the door. Bobbie Stevens came in and took a seat on the bench beside him, but the cowboy only nodded and continued to eat.

"I'm sorry and glad, Star," the girl began hesitantly. "Dad told me that you were his new deputy."

Star Smith nodded and reached for his double cut of apple pie. The rheumatic old cook filled his quart cup with steaming coffee, and the cowboy pushed back his plate and reached in his pocket for the makings.

"What you sorry about?" he growled, and refused to meet her eyes.

"Boss La Verne," the girl answered, with a frown wrinkling her forehead. "He's a hard man to beat, Star."

The new deputy shrugged and fired his smoke. His fingers went up and touched the badge on his vest, and then he smiled and reached for his old black hat. The girl caught his hand and stopped him.

"Please be careful," she urged. "La Verne has a dozen men working for him down there at the Lookout Saloon, and he must have that many more at the Box V."

"I'll be careful," Smith answered carelessly, and leaned forward to study her pretty face. "Anything special I ought to know?" he asked quietly.

"I haven't told dad about it yet," the girl whispered, and leaned closer as she lowered her voice. "I heard today that Boss La Verne was going to run for sheriff."

"What's that got to do with me?" the new deputy asked curiously.

"Several things," Bobbie murmured. "Dad isn't as young as he was, and he would retire right now if there was another good man ready to take his place. Everyone knows La Verne is crooked, but they have no proof. Can't you see what it would mean if he was elected as sheriff of Hardin County?"

Star Smith reached into his right vest pocket and gripped his father's old law star. His young face took on a hard fighting expression that made little ridges of muscle frame up around his lean jaws.

"Yes, I know," the girl murmured. "I felt it this afternoon when I reached into your pocket for the money to pay your fine."

Star Smith straightened up and jerked his hand away from his vest pocket. His eyes were glittering points of blue steel when he faced the girl and tried to read how much she knew.

"You didn't feel anything but a horseshoe nail," he growled. "And I'm warning you to keep your mouth closed tight about things you might be just guessing about!"

Bobbie Stevens came to her feet and faced him with flashing brown eyes. Her little hands were clenched angrily.

"Mend your manners, cowboy!" she cried, and then her eyes softened. "I was only a little brat ten years ago," she whispered. "But I remember a blue-eyed button who roped a brush steer right out there in the river pasture," and she caught up his left hand and stared at the scars on his fingers.

Star Smith glared at her with anger surging through his saddle-toughened young body. His white teeth were clenched tightly, and then he sighed when the girl smiled to show the deep dimples in both cheeks.

"I never saw you before in all my life," and the cowboy's words were slow and clear. "Do you savvy that, Bobbie Stevens?"

The girl shook her head slowly. "I don't understand," she answered stubbornly. "You are young Bob Rollins, and your father called you 'Star' because you always wore one and made out that some day you would be the sheriff of Hardin County!"

The new deputy jerked back as though he had been slapped in the face. "You're guessing," he growled savagely. "My name is Star Smith!"

"Star," the girl murmured, "can't you see that everyone will recognize you within a few days? These folks are accustomed to reading the slightest sign, and they remember what they have seen."

"Tell a man," the cowboy grunted. "I'm just a pore ignorant brush-popper, and I wouldn't know."

"You wouldn't," the girl agreed. "But you look enough like sheriff Bob Rollins to be his—his son. You walk just like he used to walk, and you wear your guns the way he did. *His* guns," she added slowly, and very clearly.

Star Smith dropped his hands to the old ivory handles thonged low on his legs. His breath was coming in short gasps like a man who has run a long distance. Then he sighed and straightened his shoulders, and now there was a different light in his blue eyes.

"There was a man by the name of Bob Rollins," he told the girl in a deep humming voice. "He was the squarest man that ever drew breath, and he was made out to look like a crooked holdup. I mean to clear that old-timer's name, but until I do, I want you to remember that my name is—Star Smith!"

The girl clutched at her throbbing heart and stared at the cold fighting courage shining in his blue eyes. Then she caught his hand and nodded assent while she squeezed his fingers hard.

"Now I understand, Star Smith," she answered softly. "And I want you to know that all your old friends are mighty proud of you!"

Star Smith closed his eyes and thought back to the long days and nights in the badlands across the border. The man he had known as Lefty Smith was buried back there, and he felt the hot tears scalding his

eyes. He had been born right here in Estrella, and the old-timers had not forgotten him.

"Am I an outlaw?" he heard himself mutter softly.

"You are not," the girl contradicted passionately. "I was named after Sheriff Robert Rollins, and you've got to clear his name!"

"I'll clear it," the deputy said quietly. "Now I've got to get back to town."

"Star," the girl murmured softly, and clung to his hand, "if you only would!"

Star Smith turned and looked into her brown eyes. "You've got another idea?" he asked quietly.

"Why don't you run for sheriff?" the girl whispered suddenly.

Star Smith jerked back a step. His lips curled over his teeth, and then he stared at the girl and realized that she was in deadly earnest.

"Huh!" he grunted. "That would be good. Star Smith, the outlaw, runnin' for sheriff!"

"Are you an outlaw?" the girl asked simply, and held his eyes steadily.

"The bank was robbed, and they never did recover all the loot," he almost snarled. "The stage was held up, but they laid it onto dad after he was shot to ribbons, and laying down there in Mexico with his arm cut off!"

"Did he do those things?" the girl asked quietly.

"You know damn well he didn't," Star Smith snapped, and then flushed with shame and gently pressed her hand. "I'm sorry, little pard," he murmured.

"That takes me back ten years," Bobbie said with a shy smile. "But you never would admit you were sorry when we were both little chips."

"A man learns a few things, give him time enough," the new deputy answered with a grin. "I said I was sorry because I cussed."

"Forget that," the girl answered seriously. "Now if you were sorry because Estrella is in danger of being ruined, it would mean something to all of us."

"And if I was that sorry?" Smith asked curiously, although his face showed that he already knew the answer.

"Then get in there and fight Boss La Verne," the girl answered sternly. "He is the fastest gun fighter in the county, and everyone knows he is crooked. If he is elected, Estrella will have an outlaw sheriff sure enough!"

Star Smith stared for a moment while the ghosts of memory marched through his mind. Fancy La Verne facing the wounded sheriff at the waterhole on the night of the bank robbery. Big Boss La Verne staring at his rough clothing in the Lookout Saloon. Scar Brannigan, who had kept a rendezvous with death, and had taken Lefty Smith with him down the dim trails.

"I'll get to town and send the doctor," Star Smith murmured, and left the girl in the cook shack.

CHAPTER V.

BOSS LA VERNE DEALS A HAND.

STAR SMITH saddled his own personal horse and rode through the lane of cottonwoods that led frem the C Bar S ranchhouse. The bay horse was rested and full of go after a double feed of grain, and somehow the cowboy felt more confident. He had raised and trained the big gelding with his own hands, and he knew every move of that smooth muscular body.

Coal oil lamps were casting a yellow glow along the main street when

he rode into Estrella and stopped at the house where old Doc Gates hung his shingle. Curious eyes stared at him from under lowered hat brims when he trotted away from the doctor's house and passed the Lookout Saloon. Star Smith looked straight ahead, but he knew that every man had seen the deputy's star on his vest.

He swung down in front of the sheriff's office and tied his horse to the rail. Then he crossed the boardwalk with his spurs chiming. Again he had the feeling that danger threatened when he felt the short hairs prickle on the back of his neck.

For a moment, he paused with his hand on the doorknob, after which he shrugged and pushed into the darkened room. He flicked a match under his nail and lifted the chimney from the desk lamp. When he had touched the wick and replaced the chimney, he stood perfectly still with his head cocked to one side.

Now he knew why he had felt the warning. He could hear deep breathing just behind him, and he turned slowly with both hands poised above his gun belts. Boss La Verne was standing with his shoulders against the back wall, smiling coldly over the barrel of a six-gun.

"Don't reach, outlaw," the big gambler warned softly. "Or I'll whittle for you when you stop kicking!"

Star Smith raised both hands and carefully spaced his boots. Anger was throbbing through his body, but he could see the cold killer light glowing in the gambler's dark eyes. He could also see the hammer being held under La Verne's big thumb, and ready to drop.

"Get it said," Star said thickly. "I smelled the odor of skunk before I turned the knob and opened the front door!"

"The wind was blowing your breath back in your face," La Verne sneered softly. "You're outside the law, cowboy. I knew it the minute you rode into town."

Star Smith turned slowly until the light caught the sheen of his badge. He saw the dark eyes narrow for a moment, but the gambler only rested his forearm against his hip and held the drop with his cocked gun.

"I'm riding behind the law, La Verne," Smith corrected quietly. "I'm Deputy Sheriff Star Smith to you and all your gang!"

Boss La Verne curled his lips in a sneering smile as he shrugged his wide shoulders. He was still wearing the hide-out gun in the shoulder holster, and the new deputy stared at a black ribbon and wondered if the gambler also carried a tiny derringer in his vest pocket.

"As your superior officer, I'm ordering you to surrender that star," the big man said slowly, and turned his shoulders to the side.

Star Smith stared at the badge on the gambler's embroidered vest. His eyes narrowed as he read the words, and then his jaw set subbornly when he raised his eyes to the dark smiling face across Crag Stevens' scarred desk.

"Sheriff, eh?" he muttered, and took a quick step forward. "That's Crag Stevens' star!" he snarled.

"Hold it, owl-hooter!" La Verne barked. "There's a murder charge again that white-haired old rustler, and the town committee appointed me acting sheriff until after the election next week. You go on the prod, and I'll bust a cap as my first official act!"

Star Smith was stunned for a moment, but he threw back his head and laughed derisively. "This town is sure hard up for peace officers,"

he sneered. "You won't ride very long behind the star of an honest man, Boss La Verne!"

"Mebbe not, Rollins," La Verne came back promptly. "But I've got men enough to back up any claims I want to make."

That stopped the cowboy while he struggled with surprise, and stared at the big gambler. So La Verne knew that he was the son of Bob Rollins, and that wouldn't help old Crag Stevens any when his case came to trial. The cowboy flicked his eyes to the side and thought swiftly.

He knew that something had happened to old Crag Stevens. The fighting old cowman would never surrender his badge of office, and something had gone wrong out in the river pasture where the sheriff had gone to bring in the bodies of the two brand blotters.

La Verne whistled softly and grinned at his captive. Two men came through the back door, and the cowboy stiffened when he recognized Blackie Kendall, the bartender from the Lookout Saloon. The other man was a lanky six-footer with a stubble of beard on his thin face, and Smith put him down as a cowhand from the Box V.

"Did you bring in the bodies?" La Verne asked quietly.

"Yeah, Boss," the Box V puncher answered. "I took them over to Mournful Saunders' burying parlors. What you going to do with this yearlin' you got hooked on the end of yore gun?"

Boss La Verne stared at Star Smith. The six-gun lowered slowly to ease the strain, but his brown eyes dared the cowboy to take a chance. Star Smith was studying the Box V cowboy, and he nodded confirmation when the gambler spoke softly.

"This gent is Shotgun Langtry," and he jerked his head at the lanky rider. "He's hell with that sawed-off scatter-gun he always packs under his coat."

Star Smith made no answer. His thoughts were out on the C Bar S where old Crag Stevens had gone to pick up the bodies of the dead rustlers. He knew that he was in the mercy seat, and that either of the three men would kill him if he made a suspicious move. The two ivory-handled guns rubbed against his legs, and Boss La Verne lowered his eyes and nodded.

"Take his hardware, Blackie," he told the bartender. "He's got the handles pitched out just so, and I'll feel better when this phony deputy is dehorned. Pull his stingers!"

The stocky bartender circled around behind Smith like a cat on the prowl. The cowboy growled low in his throat when he felt the tugs that disarmed him, and then La Verne came forward behind his spiking gun. His dark face left no doubt as to his intentions.

"You make a move, and Shotgun will scatter you all over the place," he warned. "I've got some business down at the Lookout, and I'm leaving you here with Shotgun. I've heard about you being fairly rapid with those bone-handled law guns, but that won't make any neverminds to Shotgun if you make a try at demonstrating yore sleight of hand. Come on, Blackie. It might not be too nice to watch!"

Star Smith stared at the big gambler with his mouth slightly open. If he understood La Verne correctly, Langtry already had his orders. The gambler laughed and walked from the office, and the door slammed swiftly behind Blackie Kendall.

Shotgun Langtry leaned against the front wall and flipped back his

greasy coat. A sawed-off shotgun, double-barreled, swiveled into his grimy hands. His eyes were watching the cowboy with a little smile curling his bearded lips. Then he thumbed back one of the hammers, and cradled the murderous weapon against his hip.

"You killed one of my pards this afternoon," Langtry said softly, and cocked his head and listened to make sure that La Verne was out of hearing. "Ain't you chip to that old long-rider who used to rod the law here in Estrella?"

Star Smith tensed his muscles when the angry blood flooded through his lean body. He saw the killer notch back the second hammer of his murder gun, and he recognized the red glow in Langtry's deep-set eyes.

The shotgun could not possibly miss at ten feet. The young deputy knew that Langtry was trying to goad him into a leap, and he bit his lips and fought down his anger.

"Keep on guessing," he muttered. "It didn't work that time!"

"The sand ran out of yore craw, eh?" Langtry sneered. "I thought for a minute you was going to get yore hackles up and go on the prod. Too bad you didn't, because my orders were to let you have both barrels where they would do the most good. There wouldn't be much left for Mournful to do after the smoke had cleared away."

"And me empty-handed," the deputy muttered. "Even Boss La Verne couldn't get away with a play like that!"

"Well, I don't know," Langtry answered carelessly. "The boss left yore six-guns right there on the desk in plain sight. It would only take a second for me to tuck them in yore hands after Sally had belched buckshot in yore face!"

He patted the stock of the gun affectionately while he leered at his prisoner. Star Smith was in a tight spot, and he knew it. If Boss La Verne had told the truth, old Crag Stevens was now a prisoner. Hank Steffins was delirious from his wound, and he, Star Smith, was as good as dead. He could read the killer's mind like an open book, and Langtry had his orders.

Star Smith thought of the warning Bobbie Stevens had given in the cook shack just before he had left the C Bar S. She had told him that Boss La Verne was a hard man to beat. He knew that the girl was not comparing him with La Verne, but the boss of Estrella had a score of hired killers on his pay roll.

Shotgun Langtry eased back against the wall with a smile on his bearded face. He glanced at the two ivory-handled six-guns, and back to the deputy's face. Then he chuckled and began to taunt Star Smith.

"Boss La Verne runs the town right now," he sneered. "He owns the biggest cattle outfit in these parts, and he aims to make it considerable bigger. On top of that he will be the next sheriff, and in due time he might even get himself married!"

"That's his business," Star Smith grunted. "And none of mine."

"That's the way Boss had it figured," Langtry continued in his nasal whining voice. "He always has cottoned to that little brown-eyed gal out on the C Bar S, and the Boss always gets what he wants."

Star Smith leaned forward, breathing hard. He felt like a man straining against heavy ropes, trying to escape from the coils that held him prisoner. Then he stared at the twin muzzles of the riot gun, and fought against the desire to leap at

his tormentor. Langtry laughed and raised the shotgun.

"Go on and make yore jump," he taunted. "Old Sally runs nine shot to the barrel, and I'm aching for to hear her talk. She bucks back again my hip like the kick of a Mizzoury mule, and thataway we'd both get a kick out of it!"

Star Smith stared at his two guns ten feet away on the sheriff's old desk. He shrugged his shoulders angrily, and then he stiffened when something rubbed against the skin between his shoulder blades. His eyes slitted and began to burn with a new light, and he lowered his lids so they would not betray him to his tormentor.

"I've lived on the Border quite a while, Shotgun," he said quietly, but his deep voice vibrated like the muted tones of a brass bell. "I learned quite a few tricks from the *vaqueros* down there. I'd like to try one or two before I quit doing what I've been doing."

"Me, I never did like them Mex cowhands none," Langtry sneered. "They tell it scary when they happen to be on top, and most times they run in a pack. Go on and try some of the tricks you learned while you was straddling the owl-hoot trail with yore old man!"

"I've got the start of a right nice little cow outfit down there in the badlands," Smith said quietly. "I know where all the waterholes are located, and I've seen a heap of owl-hooters come and go in my time."

Shotgun Langtry leaned back against the wall, but he did not relax his vigilance. His left hand held the gun halfway up the twin barrels, and his right forefinger was curled around the double triggers.

"A gent ought to have a chance to say his prayers," he sneered. "So keep right on wind-jamming if it helps you any. But you ought to see what the last feller looked like when I tripped both triggers at the same time!"

Star Smith stared into the mean little eyes and sighed. His own eyes wandered back to the desk, and he felt a sudden ache in his hands.

"If I just had one of my guns," he growled softly. "I'd take a chance against that sawed-off!"

"But you ain't got one of yore old man's guns," the killer taunted. "Everybody in town knew them ivory-handled cutters the minute you racked into Estrella on that big bay. Boss La Verne spotted you right off, but he wanted to see what the law would do."

"Those two pards of yours," the deputy answered. "Both of 'em was the same breed as yoreself. They laid back in the brush, and figured on wiping out old Hank without giving him a show!"

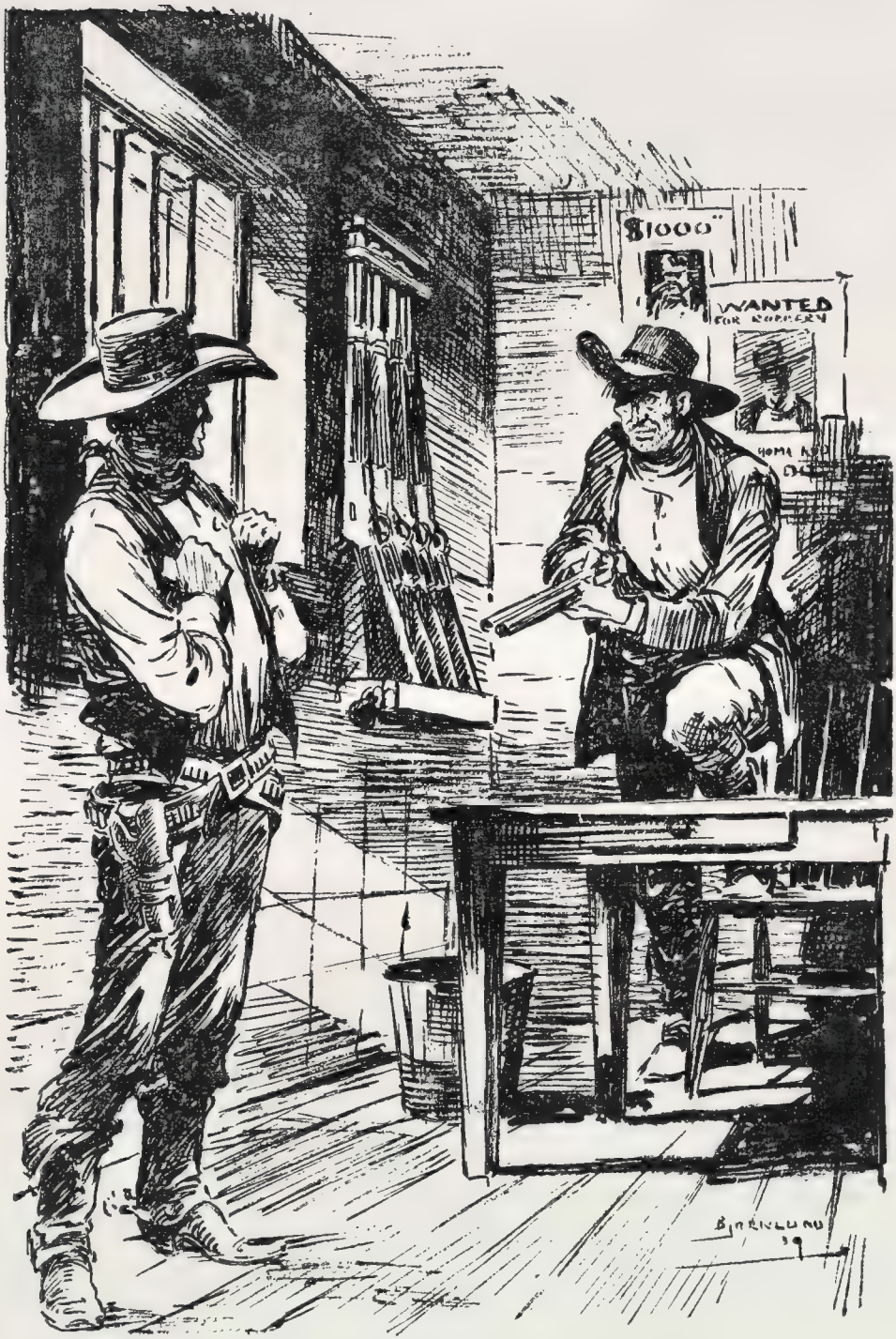
Langtry began to growl in his throat. For a moment Star Smith thought he had gone too far. The red light was glowing fiercely in the deep-set eyes, and then Shotgun Langtry grunted and came out of his crouch.

"Suffer a while," he sneered. "You don't fool me for a minute. Try one of those tricks you learned down there from yore pards on the Mex border!"

"Now take you," the deputy said quietly. "You could ride out of town and get a fresh start down Posado way. What did La Verne ever do for you?"

"He gave me a job when I needed one," Langtry answered promptly. "He pays me fighting wages, and up to now I've always earned them. Take the night yore old man made a getaway!"

Star Smith leaned forward with a light of interest in his blue eyes. He



Star Smith gazed at the gaping muzzles, then hooked his thumbs in his vest to ease the strain on his arms.

had always wondered about that night ten years ago, but Lefty had never mentioned it.

"What about that night?" he asked softly.

"I wasn't here then," Langtry growled. "Fancy La Verne hit yore old man, but he didn't kill him. Rollins bled like a stuck hog, but he wouldn't have lasted two minutes if I had been there with my Sally gun!"

Star Smith stared at the gaping muzzles and nodded gravely. Then he hooked his thumbs in his vest to ease the strain on his muscles. A plan was forming in his mind, and he locked his jaws to stop the smile that was curling his lips.

CHAPTER VI.

A BORDER TRICK

SHOTGUN LANGTRY stared for a moment while he watched the tall young deputy. Star Smith shrugged and came back to the subject of Fancy La Verne.

"Did you ever hear what happened to Fancy?" he asked quietly.

"I didn't know him," Langtry grunted. "I heard that he was a big handsome hombre who could slick an ace out of a deck of cards, and a man looking right at him. He was also supposed to be double fast with his six-guns."

"He wasn't so fast," the deputy grunted. "My dad was down with his head under him. We were at a waterhole down there near the border. Fancy La Verne rode up and made a pass for his gun, but he never cleared leather!"

Shotgun Langtry straightened and stared at his prisoner. Then he took a deep breath and started to laugh.

"Mebbe you killed Fancy," he sneered. "Seeing that yore paw was done for."

Star Smith slowly nodded his head. His blue eyes were smoldering with memories, and his voice held a far-away note when he answered the killer across the desk.

"I killed him," he said simply. "I thought mebbe you'd want to pass the word to Boss La Verne. He's always wondered what became of that handsome brother of his."

"I'll tell him," Langtry answered. "But all that happened ten years ago."

Star Smith grunted and raised his right hand to his hat. He scratched his head carelessly, and half turned away from the man across the room. Then he reached down behind his neck and scratched below his collar band.

"Lousy, eh?" Langtry sneered, and turned his head slightly when the thud of hoofs sounded out in the street.

Star Smith also heard the approach of horses. His eyes were slitted bits of blued steel while he continued his scratching. His fingers gripped the haft of the throwing knife between his shoulder blades, and then his hand whipped down and out as he threw himself to the floor.

Shotgun Langtry heard the whir of steel before he saw the speeding blade. His fingers tripped the double triggers of his shotgun, and the flaming blast exploded to rock the little room. Star Smith flattened out on the floor, but he heard the wings of death rush over his head when the buckshot screamed by and tore out the wooden panel of the wall where he had been standing.

He rolled over like a cat and came to his knees with both hands reaching for the ivory-handled guns on the desk. The smooth butts thudded against his rope-burned palms, and his thumbs rocked the hammers back

when he came up in a crouch facing Shotgun Langtry.

He stared for a moment at the lanky man who was down on his haunches with his back against the wall. Langtry was trying to pull the knife from his chest, but his muscles failed before he could free the blade. His loose mouth dropped open in a gurgling gasp, and then he slid sideways and rattled his rusty boots against the spur-splintered planking.

The deputy shook his head to clear away the echoes of the explosions. The acrid smoke of black powder burned his throat, and he leaned forward to listen to the sounds from the street. Hoofbeats were coming on slowly, and the cowboy smiled when he remembered the order La Verne had given to Langtry.

He leaned over and blew down the lamp chimney to plunge the office in darkness. Then he raced through the cell block to the back door of the jail. Three men were just reining in at the tie rack. The new deputy recognized old Crag Stevens in the middle. The other two men were strangers to him, but they were evidently Box V cowboys from their rigging and gear.

Star Smith stepped out from the shadows with a gun in each hand.

"Reach high, hombres!" he called sharply. "The law talking from behind sixes full!"

"It's the outlaw's whelp!" one of the cowboys gasped. "Don't shoot, Rollins!"

The name struck Star Smith like a blow. Every one in Estrella knew him, but he had made a promise to clear the name of Rollins before taking it as his own. His voice expressed his bitterness when he called to the sheriff.

"Get your guns back, Crag. They didn't know enough to handcuff you, and you might as well pull their stingers while you're at it. I'll hold them steady while you do the needful!"

The old sheriff slid from his saddle and emptied holsters all around. Then he made the two men dismount under his recovered gun, and drove them ahead of him to where Star Smith waited at the fringe of shadows.

"There's a murder charge agin' me, Star," he growled under his breath. "Boss La Verne is acting sheriff until after election!"

"That's what he told me," the deputy answered quietly. "Let's get back in the jail before the acting sheriff sees us. I'd hate to have these two hands of his get killed, but I'd use them for shields if their pards started to shoot."

He smiled when the two men shuddered and stared anxiously down the dusty street. Crag Stevens was flexing the muscles of his right arm, and then he remembered the sweating horses.

"I'll lead the critters back to the corral," he muttered. "Keep those two under your guns. They're both Box V hands," and he led the three horses back behind the jail.

Star Smith pushed the prisoners through the back door and waited for old Crag. The sheriff came in and opened two cell doors, and Smith grinned when he ordered the cowboys into separate cells.

"Make a peep and I'll chain you to the bars," the old officer growled. "You fellers better make up your minds to talk straight, and you can think it over while me and my deputy decide what to do with you."

Star Smith walked ahead and stopped just outside the office door. Crag Stevens looked up question-

ingly, and tightened his lips when his new deputy spoke.

"There will be a murder charge against me before morning," Star Smith murmured. "Did you ever hear of a gent by the name of Shotgun Langtry?"

"That killing son!" the sheriff growled. "He's one of Boss La Verne's right bowers. He'd drop both hammers of that riot gun he packs, and stand there laughing while the victim rattled his boots!"

"He wouldn't do that," the deputy said grimly, and took a match from his pocket.

The sheriff watched while the deputy slid into the office and lighted the lamp. Star Smith turned the wick low, and then he beckoned to Crag Stevens.

"Just take a look inside your office," he grunted. "Be careful and don't show yourself against the light!"

The sheriff tiptoed through the gloom and stared at the body under the window. Then he saw the smoke-grimed shotgun on the floor, and turned his head to see the bullet-torn panel in the back wall.

"There wouldn't have been enough left of him to pack down to the parlors," he whispered. "But I don't see the man he shot!"

"You're looking at the feller he shot at," the deputy said slowly. "Shotgun missed for the first time in his sinful life."

"He's got a knife in his ribs clear up to the handle," the sheriff grunted, after a look at the body, and then he turned to stare at his new deputy.

"That's a border trick," he muttered, when Smith remained silent. "Some of your work, Star?"

"I did it," the deputy answered hoarsely. "Boss La Verne gave him orders to smoke me down with that scatter gun. Like you know, lots of cowboys carry a spare gun under their arm, or a derringer down in one of their boots. I didn't have one, but I remembered the knife between my shoulder blades."

Crag Stevens shuddered when he glanced at the bullet-riddled panel in the wall. The gun in his right hand trembled slightly, and he tugged on his white mustache with his left hand.

"I can't figure how you got away," he whispered. "That scatter gun would sweep everything in the room."

"It bellowed like a cannon," Smith murmured. "I figured you would hear it."

"Those two back there seemed to know something about it," the sheriff answered. "They didn't whip the horses up any when both barrels busted loose, and I expected to find you scattered all over the jail!"

"So did Boss La Verne," the deputy answered dryly. "But Shotgun looked away for just a minute when he heard your horses coming down the street. I knew he was going to trigger before you got here, so I made my throw and then flattened out on the floor."

"Right through the heart," the sheriff whispered with a shudder he could not repress. "I never did like cold steel none to speak of. I can face a spitting gun, but I'd run from a knife if I had the chance."

"Quiet!" Smith warned under his breath. "There's somebody outside the front door!"

"Shotgun!" a deep voice called. "Did you finish your job like you was supposed to do?"

Star Smith nudged the sheriff with his elbow. Crag Stevens gripped his gun and whined softly in his corded throat. Then the door opened slowly, and Boss La Verne stepped

into the room. A heavy gun hung in his right hand, and the sheriff's star glittered on his embroidered vest when he came into the circle of light.

"Elevate, gambling man!" Star Smith barked sharply. "And don't make a try at tilting your gun!"

Boss La Verne sucked in a deep breath and dropped his hand slowly to his side. Star Smith stepped forward with a gun in each hand, and an expression of determination on his tanned face.

"Step inside and shut the door behind you," the deputy ordered softly. "We're going to have a little talk, and there might be something you'd like to see. Turn up the lamp, sher'ff!"

Crag Stevens pulled down the window shade before he turned up the wick. Then he walked up to Boss La Verne and jabbed his gun muzzle deep in the gambler's lean belly. His left hand went up to the embroidered vest and tore his star away with a savage jerk that ripped the cloth to ribbons.

"I always swore to take that old star with me when I gave up sheriffing," he muttered. "And I'm too old to change my mind now," he added with a quick intake of breath.

Boss La Verne made no answer. The big gambler was staring at the body under the window. He saw the haft of the throwing knife against the soggy red shirt, and his dark eyes were like coals of fire when he turned to Star Smith.

"Did you do that?" he asked hoarsely.

"It's an old border trick I learned while I was getting my growth," the deputy answered quietly. "I'm right proud to admitting that I did it, and me under both barrels of that sawed-off shotgun."

"You are under arrest for murder," La Verne spat savagely. "Langtry was one of my deputies, and I swore him in myself!"

Star Smith shrugged carelessly. "You won't arrest me," he said quietly. "I did it when I was part of the law here in this county, and I still had the star on my vest. It's there now if you want to make sure!"

Boss La Verne lowered his eyes and stared at the badge on the deputy's vest just above the heart. Old Crag Stevens smiled and put in a word of his own.

"Seems like you're new at this law business, Boss," he chuckled. "You took Star's guns away from him, but you didn't take his badge. He was acting within his legal rights, and it wouldn't change none even if some of yore hired gunnies was to kill Star. There were a dozen witnesses saw me swear him in!"

"I'll get you, Stevens," the gambler promised softly. "You won't stand a chance of being re-elected, and things will be different when I take office for good. I thought mebbe you'd want to know!"

Crag Stevens suddenly drooped under the weight of his years. Star Smith clicked his teeth when the big gambler smiled, and then he stepped up to La Verne and spoke from behind his father's gun.

"Mebbe you'd like to know a few things, La Verne," he drawled quietly. "I'm running against you for the office of sheriff!"

Crag Stevens stared and then straightened his shoulders. His face broke into a wide smile, and he looked at the surprised gambler and laughed out loud.

"Mebbe you know who Star really is," he taunted the angry gambler. "Mebbe you can stop him from being elected!"

"He's branded outlaw!" La Verne snapped. "He won't have a chance!"

"I'm through talking," the deputy answered, and jerked his head toward the door. "Now get out!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE BACKFIRE.

THE big gambler stared at the cowboy's hard tanned face for a long moment. Then he turned slowly and walked to the door. There was no fear in his attitude, or in his poker face, when he paused for a last word.

"That brands both you and that old rustler as outlaws," he said quietly. "And I'll get up my own posse and bring you both in according to the law. That means—dead or alive!"

"Him," Star Smith said, and pointed to the body of Shotgun Langtry. "He tried it, and he bragged that he was obeying your orders. You see what happened to him."

"I'll see to it that the rest of the citizens see what happened to my sworn deputy," La Verne promised grimly, and stalked away toward the Lookout Saloon.

Star Smith stared after the big man thoughtfully. Then he put out the light and spoke softly to old Crag Stevens.

"He worked mighty fast, sheriff," he said, like a man who had made a discovery. "He must have called the town committee together before supper, and if we could prove it, those Box V hands were venting that brand at the time. The charge against you was already planned, and on top of that, you didn't commit any crime."

"That's for the court to decide," Stevens answered wearily. "I can't hold office while accused of a felony."

"Now say you had a grass fire out on the range," the cowboy suggested. "With just enough wind blowing to drive the blaze. Say it was blowing back toward the fire. What would you do?"

"I'd set a back fire and burn back to it," Stevens answered without hesitation.

"Then sit down there where you can see and make out a warrant," Star Smith growled, and, for some reason he gripped the handles of his father's old guns. "Charge Charley La Verne with robbing the Estrella bank ten years ago. I'll furnish the proof to convict him, and serve the paper myself!"

The old sheriff stared at his new deputy with eyes that were trying to see into the past. He remembered the night the bank had been robbed of twenty thousand dollars—the same night old Bob Rollins had left town under a cloud of suspicion. He walked up to Star Smith and gravely offered his hand.

"I knew you the minute I laid eyes on you, Star," he said slowly. "And I had a long talk with Hank Steffins just before I rode out after those bodies. I'll make out the warrant, if you will promise me one thing."

"You wouldn't ask if it wasn't something I could do," the cowboy answered. "I promise, sheriff."

"Don't try to serve the paper personally until after the election," Stevens grunted, and sat down at his desk.

Star Smith lighted the lamp again and turned it low. Then he watched at the front door while the sheriff scratched with his pen. Crag Stevens folded a paper and sealed it in an envelope, and when the cowboy turned, he handed him another paper.

"Put that one in your pocket," he said quietly. "I've made out a duplicate, and I'm mailing it to the

postmaster. Jud Tower is honest and fearless, and he'll post this other warrant on the bulletin board where it will do the most good."

Star Smith took the warrant and tucked it in his pocket. Then he jerked his head toward the cells and touched the ring of keys at the old sheriff's belt.

"One of those Box V hands had a cast in his left eye, and a whine in his voice," he described clearly. "We'll take him out to the C Bar S with us. That rannihan will talk unless I miss my guess."

Crag Stevens studied for a moment and then opened the cell. He stepped in with a pair of handcuffs while the cowboy covered the prisoner, and the click of metal on his wrists loosened the fellow's tongue.

"I was only doing what I was told to do," he whined. "And Boss La Verne swore me in to do it!"

Star Smith edged forward and slowly drew his right-hand gun. "Keep your mouth shut and you won't get hurt," he said coldly. "But I'll act within my rights if you go yelling your head off to kick up a fuss. You are taking another ride with the sheriff and me."

An hour later, the three men rode into the C Bar S ranch yard and stopped in front of the bunkhouse. Old Bart Conway stepped to the door with five cowboys at his back, and all of them were ready for war. Star Smith glanced at the shotgun in the old foreman's hands, and jerked his head toward their prisoner.

"Better put him in the tack shed, Bart," he suggested. "He'll want to talk to us tomorrow!"

"There ain't no time like the present," Conway grunted, and jerked the Box V cowboy from his saddle. "Get inside," he growled fiercely, and pushed the cowering man into the lighted room.

Hank Steffins was sitting up against the wall in his bed, and the old doctor was packing his bag ready for the ride back to town. Star Smith stripped the riding gear from the horses and turned them into the corral, and the crew was gathered around the Box V man when he entered the bunkhouse.

"Now you talk up, Shifty Randall," Bart Conway said to the prisoner. "I've seen you prowling around over on our south range, and one of yore pards talked this afternoon before he cashed in his chips. Like you might have heard, we caught them two venting a brand."

"I don't know nothing," the cringing cowboy whispered. "I only did what I was told to do!"

"And you'd get twenty years in prison for doing it," Crag Stevens interrupted harshly. "That's the penalty for rustling down in this part of Texas!"

Star Smith stopped just inside the door where his face was in the shadow. He was watching the accused man without being seen, and he wondered if the old foreman's bluff would have any effect. Evidently Bart Conway knew Randall and his ways when he reached out suddenly and shook a paper under the cowboy's nose.

"This warrant has your name on it, Shifty," the old ramrod said quietly. "We're short about three hundred head of beef steers, and you helped run them off. There's another warrant out for Boss La Verne, but he'd let you fellers take all the blame!"

Shifty Randall turned pale and began to breathe heavily. His eyes were red-rimmed when he glanced around the ring of scowling faces and saw the guns in the hands of the

C Bar S crew. Then he wet his lips nervously and shuddered.

"Twenty years shut away from the sun," he whispered. "By damn, I won't go alone!"

"Mebbe you wouldn't have to serve time if you was right smart," the old sheriff suggested. "You could write a confession and sign it in front of all these witnesses. If you did that, like as not Bart Conway would tear up the warrant, and give you back your horse."

Shifty Randall jerked up with an eager light of hope in his pale blue eyes. "You mean I could hunt a new range?" he whispered.

"It would probably be safest," Conway grunted. "Until Boss La Verne was safe in jail, or in boot-hill!"

Shifty Randall studied for a moment and then turned to search the room. He saw Star Smith standing just inside the door, and he shuddered again and nodded his head.

"Keep that border outlaw off me," he whispered. "It was him who killed Fancy La Verne!"

Star Smith gasped and then leaped into the circle of light. His gun was in his right hand when he grabbed the prisoner with his left, and he dug the muzzle savagely against Shifty Randall's quaking heart.

"Talk fast, feller!" he growled. "How do you know about Fancy La Verne?"

"Take him off me!" Randall screamed. "You made a promise!"

"Easy, Star," Bart Conway murmured. "It ain't like you to jump a man thataway, and him cuffed!"

Star Smith was breathing hard when he lowered his gun and stepped away. His eyes were boring into the cowering prisoner's face, and his voice was like rasping metal when he spoke.

"How do you know about Fancy La Verne?"

"I was with him that night," Randall murmured weakly, and the sweat of fear stood out on his forehead. "Fancy made me ride with him when he trailed old Bob Rollins. He was in the lead when we found you and old Bob by the waterhole down there near Posado. Old Bob was down with his head under him, but you grabbed one of his guns and emptied it into Fancy!"

Silence fell over the long room, broken only by the hoarse breathing of stunned men. They had all heard the story of the bank holdup, and they stopped breathing when Star Smith stepped up to the prisoner and held out his gun.

"It was this same gun that killed Fancy La Verne," he said just above his breath. "Keep on talking!"

"That's all I know," Randall whimpered. "I led my hoss back a ways when I see two Mexicans coming up the trail. I figgered old Bob Rollins was dead, so I lit a shuck and reported to the Boss!"

"Boss La Verne?" Crag Stevens asked quietly.

Shifty Randall nodded, too frightened for speech. Crag Stevens walked over to a little shelf and picked up the bunkhouse pen. He wrote rapidly for some moments, and then he brought the paper and pen to Randall.

"Read it and sign," he grunted. "It says there that the La Verne gang robbed the bank!"

"I didn't say that," the prisoner objected, and then he glanced at Star Smith.

The cowboy was staring at him with eyes that glistened like polished blue steel. Hank Steffins leaned forward and added a word of his own.

"There was Scar and Faro Brannigan," he tallied quietly. "Charley

and Fancy La Verne made two more. Now you sign that paper before old Bob Rollins' chip gets up his mad. He's waited ten long years to clear the old sheriff's good name!"

Shifty Randall picked up the pen and signed his shaky signature. Star Smith slipped back to the door when Crag Stevens took the paper and placed it in his pocket after the witnesses had signed. Then Bart Conway sighed and touched Randall with a stiff forefinger.

"About this rustling," he began sternly. "Your horse is waiting outside if you talk straight!"

"There's only four men left on the Box V," Randall whispered. "Boss La Verne has something on every one of them fellers, and they had to do what he said."

"Which was what?" the old foreman barked.

Shifty Randall closed his eyes and counted his chances. He knew what would happen to him if Boss La Verne learned of his confession. He also knew that old Crag Stevens would keep his word—either way. Liberty on the one hand; prison on the other. Then he made up his mind and faced Bart Conway.

"You know every foot of the range hereabouts," Randall began hoarsely. "About three miles beyond Little Wolf River, there's a blind valley open at one end."

"I've hunted up there many's the time," Conway answered, with a nod of his head. "High rocky walls on all sides, and the bottle-neck enters through a steep narrow pass."

"That's the place," Randall whispered. "Boss La Verne figgers on running those steers down across the Border after he gets elected. There's better than three hundred head of C Bar S critters in that hideaway!"

Crag Stevens went back to the shelf and began to write. Bart Conway stared at the prisoner and chewed on his walrus mustache. The C Bar S crew were growling softly while they stared at the prisoner, and then Star Smith came forward.

"No funny stuff, you hands," he told the threatening cowboys. "We made a promise, and we aim to keep it. Let him sign that paper, Crag!"

Shifty Randall signed the paper and shuffled his rusty boots. Star Smith took him by the arm and led him across the room. A Box V horse was waiting at the rail, and Smith offered his hand to the shaking prisoner. A small roll of bills stuck in Randall's palm when the new deputy released his grip.

"Thanks for what you did, Shifty," Star Smith said gratefully. "There's a riding stake, and you better put a lot of miles between you and Estrella before Boss La Verne starts riding gun sign. You're a free man, unless—"

"La Verne won't catch me," Randall muttered, and leaped to his saddle. "Good luck when you face that killin' son for a showdown!"

CHAPTER VIII.

SHOWDOWN PROMISE

OLD CRAG STEVENS and his daughter rode away from the C Bar S on the following morning, with the first rays of the early sun. The old sheriff was smiling when they turned their horses north, and his voice was a contented hum when he spoke to Bobbie.

"No use in me staying here and getting into trouble with La Verne. It's nearly a full week until election, and we've got lots of ground to cover. What do you think of my idea?

"Bob Rollins for sheriff," the girl answered enthusiastically, and nodded her black curls. "And the

best part of it is that he doesn't even know!"

"He made a promise," the old officer explained, "not to take his rightful name until he has cleared up the name of old Bob!"

"I never thought I'd be making stump speeches," the girl answered soberly, and then her brown eyes sparkled. "I'm going to love it," she said happily. "La Verne meant to kill you last night, and we owe Star more than we can ever repay."

"He's the next sheriff of Hardin County," Stevens said confidently. "This is Wednesday, and the election is next Tuesday. Let's get going!"

Back on the C Bar S, the crew was gathered around the table in the cook shack. The cowboys eyed the new member with the respect they saved for a top hand, and Star Smith had proven himself. Bart Conway gave his orders for the day's work, and he turned to Star when the crew had ridden away.

"You better saddle a fast horse and hide him out," he suggested. "I've got an idea that Boss La Verne might ride out, and we don't want any trouble."

"I want some trouble," the cowboy grunted. "I've waited ten years when I didn't know what I was waiting for, but now I've got all the proof I need!"

"Just a minute, deputy," the old foreman said sharply, and stared at Star Smith when the cowboy glanced up quickly. "Might be you're forgetting that you are part of the law."

"Law!" Star replied hotly. "My dad was the law, and he got tagged an outlaw when he risked his life to uphold the law that hunted him down. Old Crag Stevens was the law, and right now he's straddling the owl-hoot trail. He made me a deputy, and I'm wanted for murder!"

"It's all in the way you look at it, Star," Conway said slowly. "And you're looking at the whole thing through the eyes of Boss La Verne. Do you realize that?"

"Him and his gang robbed the bank," Star Smith grated harshly. "He rustled stock that we know of, and he whipped old Crag plumb out of the law herd!"

"He did all those things and more," Bart Conway agreed. "And he made a lot of folks think the way he wanted them to think. Right now he's got you thinking the very same way."

Star Smith stared for a long moment and then nodded his head. He could see what the old foreman was driving at, and a flush of shame swept across his tanned face. Bart Conway saw that he had scored his point, and he continued to talk in a low persuasive tone.

"A sheriff is elected, not appointed," he went on gravely. "In case the office is vacated for some reason, the town committee can appoint a man to serve as acting sheriff. They did that very thing yesterday afternoon, but the committee are men under the control of La Verne. Do you know why they calls him 'Boss'?"

"He runs the Lookout Saloon, and the Box V outfit," Smith answered sullenly.

"And he practically owns the general store, and holds stock in the bank," Conway added. "On top of that, you heard what Shifty Randall allowed last night. La Verne has something hanging over every man who works for him. That's why they call him Boss La Verne!"

"If I could only come out in the open and run agin' him for sheriff," the cowboy sighed. "Nobody up here knows Star Smith, and they wouldn't vote for me if they did!"

"You ain't Star Smith, and you never can tell," the old foreman said quietly, and glanced across the lower pasture. "Vamoose!" he growled softy. "Yonder comes the devil with a posse!"

The cowboy grunted. "I won't leave Crag Stevens to fight alone!" he said.

"Crag left at four this morning for parts unknown," Conway chuckled. "Now you run for your horse, and hit out for the hills!"

Star Smith ducked behind the tack shed and raced for the big barn where he had tied his horse. La Verne rode into the yard with four hard-faced men carrying rifles across their knees, and six-guns in their holsters. The gambler came straight to Bart Conway and swung from the saddle.

"I've got a warrant for old Crag Stevens," he clipped. "I've come to get him and that other killer!"

"Looks like you will have to wait until after election to serve your papers," Conway answered carelessly. "They both took to the hills early this morning."

La Verne eyed the old foreman closely and glanced at the house. "We'll just take a look," he grunted. "Two of you men unload!"

Bart Conway blocked the way and dropped a gnarled hand to his gun. "I said they were gone," he repeated quietly. "I'll go with you if you insist on making a search, but I'll settle with the first man who starts kicking things around!"

Boss La Verne stared down from his tall six feet. He weighed nearly two hundred pounds, and his dark eyes glittered when he fought back his anger. Election was only six days away, but he wanted to make a showing to influence the voters. He shrugged and stepped aside with a grunt.

"Lead on, but we're making a good go-over," he growled.

Old Bart led the way to the house and opened the big front doors. La Verne and his scowling companions stamped through every room of the big house, and then headed for the bunkhouse. Conway smiled behind his drooping mustaches and brought up the rear when they walked inside.

Old Hank Steffins was sitting up in bed with his back against the wall. A pair of six-shooters were close to his hands on the quilt, and a heavy buffalo gun was cradled against his right hip with his finger through the trigger guard.

"Howdy, La Verne," the old deputy said pleasantly. "Draw up chairs and set a spell."

La Verne frowned and glanced at the heavy rifle. "You are talking to the law, feller," he rasped. "Put down that cannon and get ready to answer some questions!"

"No," Steffins refused. "I was shot by one of your hired bushwhackers, and if I have to die, I'll do it with a smoking gun in my hands. Fire away, and choose yore own weapons!"

Boss La Verne stared at the old officer with surprise mirrored on his swarthy face. It was plain that he did not know about Hank Steffins and his meeting with the brand blotters, but it was also evident that he intended to do something about it.

"You was out there?" he asked cautiously.

"It was me who found them hands of yours planting evidence against old Crag," Steffins answered grimly. "I got one of your rustlers in the line of duty, but the second one was hid back in the brush. An old pard of mine tallied for the sneaking son, but I stopped a slug in the shoulder."

"This pard of yours," the gambler asked coldly, "would he be Star Smith, the outlaw's whelp?"

The old deputy growled deep in his throat and set his jaw. "You recognized that yearlin' the day he rode into town," he snarled. "You knew him from those ivory-handled six-guns, the same pair that tallied for three of your gang!"

He could see that the big man was puzzled. Boss La Verne was standing with both white hands on the grips of his guns, boots spaced wide. Three of his men were fanned out behind him, with old Bart Conway at the door.

"Those three," La Verne murmured softly. "I'd like to know."

"The first was Fancy," Hank Steffins answered with a grin splitting his stubbled old face. "He trailed old Bob Rollins to the Border, and he found him on the ground. He was getting ready to line his sights, when old Bob's kid emptied a gun into his sneaking heart!"

The gambler narrowed his dark eyes and spoke softly. "I'll remember that," he said. "The other two?"

"Faro Brannigan tried his luck," the old deputy continued. "Old Bob tallied for him with his left hand. You ought to know the other one!"

"Scar Brannigan," La Verne filled in. "He went hunting two weeks ago, and he never came back."

"He won't," Steffins grunted. "Him and old Bob made it a tie, and I helped bury them both!"

La Verne shook his big head. One of the men to the right snarled savagely when a gun leaped to his hand.

"That's all we wanted to know, Steffins. Drop that long gun!"

"I've been watching you, feller," old Bart Conway interrupted from the door. "I've got you under my sights, and you don't pack the nerve to make it one for one. You could get old Hank, but I'd drill you before you could turn and ear back again!"

Boss La Verne smiled and waited. He had left one man with the horses for just such a contingency, and the shot ought to come at any time to send Bart Conway to the floor. The seconds ticked away, and then a pair of boots scraped on the floor.

"Keep him covered, Bart," a deep voice spoke savagely. "I've got this other one on the end of my gun!"

Boss La Verne turned his head slowly and raised both hands. Star Smith was just behind the fourth member of the posse, and the stocky man was trembling with fear when the muzzle of Smith's gun pressed against his spine. It was Blackie Kendall, bartender at the Lookout, and his black greasy hair was wet with clammy sweat.

"You, mister," Smith barked at the man covering Hank Steffins. "Drop that gun, and do it sudden!"

The cowboy dropped his gun and quickly raised his hands. Boss La Verne was staring at Star Smith with hell blazing in his black eyes. Both hands were clawed just above his hips, and a sudden sound would have sent them driving down to his twin holsters.

"Easy," Hank Steffins warned in a whisper. "This old Henry throws an ounce of lead, and I'll blow a hole through your back big enough to hide a good-sized dog. Pull their stingers, Bart, and then empty all guns!"

Bart Conway grinned and started to make the rounds. The posse members offered no resistance, but Boss La Verne curled back his lips and snarled like a wolf.

"You can't take my irons!" he muttered. "I'll sell out first!"

"Hold them so, Bart," Star Smith

said softly, and waited until the old foreman stepped back to cover the posse. Then he walked up to La Verne and stopped three paces away.

"I'm unloading your guns to keep you honest, Boss La Verne," he said quietly. "After which I'll put them in your holsters, and let you ride back to town. You might be a curly wolf, but it ain't your night to howl!"

The big gambler teetered on the thin soles of his handmade boots. His dark face worked with fury, and then he smiled and relaxed.

"My night will come," he said evenly. "You win this deal!"

Star Smith stepped in behind his gun and jerked the right-hand weapon first. He stuck it deep in his belt and took La Verne's second gun, and then he stepped back and jacked shells through the loading gate while Conway and old Hank held the drop.

"There's your cutters," he told the gambler, and seated the balanced weapons deep in the holsters.

"Thanks," La Verne grunted. "I'll see you later—through law smoke!"

"Keno," Star Smith answered quietly. "Right after election, but you won't be behind the law star. Now get out, and don't try to run a blazer if you want to hear the votes counted!"

"I'll wait, outlaw," the gambler promised. "And I've got a warrant in my pocket for your arrest. Of course if you get cold feet and decide to leave town—"

"I'll be here," the cowboy promised grimly. "Now you and yours get along gone before I get tired of waiting!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE NEW SHERIFF

HANK STEFFINS was sitting on the broad porch of the C Bar S ranchhouse, working the muscles of his right arm. Bart Conway watched the old deputy with a smile creasing his wrinkled face, while Star Smith broke down his guns, one at a time, and carefully cleaned and oiled both weapons. All three men looked up when a pair of riders came up the lane, and then Conway yipped like a kid cowhand.

"It's old Crag and his gal Bobbie!" he shouted. "Welcome home, sheriff!"

Old Crag Stevens dismounted and came straight to Star Smith. He smiled when he saw the shining gun in the cowboy's hand, and Star flushed and seated the .45 on his left leg. The sheriff held out his hand and gripped hard.

"You are just as good as elected sheriff of Hardin County, son," he announced confidently. "Bobbie and I have been making stump speeches for a week, and we didn't spare the horses none."

"Me?" the cowboy gasped. "I haven't cleared my name yet?"

Bobbie Stevens took his hand and looked deep into his eyes. Then the dimples leaped to her tanned cheeks when she smiled and vised down on his fingers with a strength that surprised him.

"Your name is cleared, Star," she murmured. "We are all riding in to vote right after lunch."

Star Smith lowered his eyes. If his name was cleared, Star Smith would be a memory of the past. A hand gripped his shoulder, and he glanced up to see Crag Stevens holding out a paper.

"Put this in your pocket, Star," the old sheriff said carelessly. "It's a warrant for the arrest of Charley La Verne. He won't be boss after today."

Star Smith took the paper and whirled on his heel. He wanted to be alone with his thoughts, and none of the little group tried to stop him.

Back of the barn, the cowboy sat on his heels and rolled a cigarette.

He watched the cattle grazing out in the river pasture, squinting his eyes against the smoke that curled from his lips. He remembered the ache in his muscles when he had faced Boss La Verne in the bunkhouse early in the last week. Now it was Tuesday, and the waiting would soon be over.

None of the riding crew talked much while they ate their noonday dinner. Conversation was at a premium when the entire crew rode to town to cast their votes. The polling place was in the office of the justice of the peace, but Star Smith was staring at a number of signs posted all over town.

"You did that, Crag," he accused the old sheriff at his side. "Those signs say to elect Bob Rollins for sheriff. I told you my name was Star Smith!"

"And now I'm telling you," Bobbie Stevens interrupted sternly. "Old Hank Steffins returned that ten thousand dollars to the bank; along with that letter your father wrote on your birthday. The justice has seen those confessions that Shifty Randall signed, and Blackie Kendall left town that day La Verne rode out to the C Bar S. Your father's name has been cleared!"

The cowboy turned away with tears clouding his blue eyes. He had the feeling that he was being watched, and he raised his head to see Boss La Verne in front of the Lookout Saloon. The gambler touched his guns suggestively, and the cowboy nodded and showed his teeth in a happy smile.

Every tie rail in town was crowded with saddled horses, and cowboys in their town clothes stamped the boardwalks with dragging spurs. A crowd of old cattlemen came up soberly and offered their hands, and Star Smith shook hands with men he did not know.

"Glad to see you back, young Bob," an old-timer growled softly. "I remember you, Star," another one chuckled. "What's this I hear about you being an outlaw?"

"Vote for him just the same," the first oldster grunted. "It's about time this town was getting cleaned up the way it was when old Bob rodded the sheriff's office!"

Star Smith felt his chest swelling with pride. The C Bar S crew was voting inside, and he walked in with old Crag and Bobbie. Three grim-faced cattlemen were acting as the judges, and another pair were already making the count. They nodded cordially and waved at Crag Stevens, and then one of them made an announcement.

"The polls close at six o'clock, folks. That's just about sundown, and the judge will pin the star on the lucky man!"

Crag Stevens glanced at his watch and took Star Smith by the arm. He led him down the sidewalk and stopped at the bank. Then he remembered that the bank was closed because of election, and went to a side door where he knocked.

"I've brought young Bob Rollins down to talk a spell," he said to the man who opened the door. "Bob, meet Joe Bundy, president of the layout."

Joe Bundy was a tall thin man with sideburns. He shook hands heartily with the cowboy and led the way to his office. Then he picked up a slip of paper and handed it to Star Smith.

"With the thanks of the bank, my boy," he said with a smile.

Star took the paper and gulped. "This is a check for five thousand

dollars, made out to Bob Rollins," he blurted.

"That's right, and that's your name," the banker beamed. "And there is about seven thousand more to your credit. It belonged to your father, and his savings have been drawing interest while you have been away!"

The cowboy stood like a man who has been stunned by a hard blow. Then he held out the check to Crag Stevens.

"Take it, Crag," he murmured weakly. "Some day I'd like to buy in a good cattle spread. I've got some money in the bank down in Posado."

"You've got twelve thousand here," Stevens answered thoughtfully. "Could you raise three thousand more?"

"I've got double that," the cowboy admitted slowly. "Neither Lefty or me could spend much down there."

"I'm getting old, young Bob," Stevens said gruffly. "I'll sell you a half interest in the C Bar S for fifteen thousand, and that way I can pay off some debts that have been riding me hard!"

"Give me a pen so I can endorse this check, and turn that other money over to my new pard," the cowboy told the smiling banker. "I wonder what Bobbie will say?" he asked the old sheriff.

"Well, it was her suggestion," Crag Stevens admitted slowly. "She was named after your dad, and you and her were mighty thick when you were both buttons!"

"I want to stay hid out until after the votes are counted," the cowboy muttered. "Can I sit in here, Mr. Bundy?"

"And welcome," the banker answered heartily. "Me and Crag will walk up with you when the results are announced."

It seemed to the cowboy that the hands of the clock on the wall raced like the flying hoofs of a running horse. He stood up and pulled his hat low when Crag Stevens twitched his gun belt and pointed at the clock.

"Straight up six o'clock, Bob. Let's get going!"

The man who had been Star Smith stood up and loosened his guns. He walked up the crowded street with the two old-timers, and a roar of sound swelled up just before they reached the office of the old judge.

"Hooray for the new sheriff! Bob Rollins has been elected three to one!"

Crag Stevens gripped the cowboy by the arm and steered him into the office. The old judge got up quickly and came forward.

"The sheriff's star," he whispered to Crag Stevens. "I want to pin it on young Bob and swear him in!"

Bob Rollins reached into the right pocket of his vest and then held out his palm to the Judge. "This was the star my dad, Bob Rollins, carried," he said proudly. "It's good enough for me!"

Five minutes later he turned and faced the cheering crowd. He could see a tall broad-shouldered man standing across the street, leaning carelessly against the wall in front of the Lookout Saloon. Then the new sheriff smiled and cuffed back his Stetson.

"Thanks for your votes, neighbors," he said quietly. "I was born right here in Estrella, and most of you knew my dad. I'll try to live up to his record!"

"You've got a right good start," a deep voice interrupted.

The crowd fell back when they recognized the arrogant voice of Boss La Verne. The gambler was stand-

ing in the street just below the boardwalk. Bob Rollins measured the crowd with a quick glance, and then he walked out ten paces and stepped into the thick dust of the street.

"Old Bob Rollins was an outlaw, and you've elected another one," La Verne told the crowd. "It was proven that old Bob Rollins robbed the bank, and the loot was never found!"

"The loot was returned to the bank," a new voice interrupted, and the old banker stepped out from the crowd. "You tried to claim the rewards, La Verne, but I never was satisfied with your proof. I paid the rewards over this afternoon!"

Boss La Verne spread his boots and stared at the new sheriff. His swarthy face did not change expression, except for the burning glow in his black eyes.

"Who got the reward?" he asked softly.

"Sheriff Bob Rollins," the banker answered clearly. "I saw a confession naming the real robbers, and young Bob brought back ten thousand dollars that his father took from the body of Fancy La Verne!"

The young sheriff coughed slightly when Boss La Verne made a step toward the banker. The gambler stopped the move and faced around with a smile curling his full lips. He did not say a word. He just stood there as if he were waiting for something—something for which he had waited a long time.

"You are under arrest, Charley La Verne," the young sheriff announced curtly. "That robbery charge is an old one, but I've got another warrant in my pocket. Hold your hand and I'll read it."

Not once did he raise his soft drawling voice. There was a new look on his tanned young face; an expression of vested authority. His left hand rose slowly to his inside coat pocket and pulled out a stiff paper. La Verne watched him like a cat with both hands poised above his holsters, but the sheriff showed no nervousness.

Neither did he become careless. He shook the paper with his left hand and held it at arm's length. He could see the big gambler even while reading, and the crowd was silent when he cleared his throat.

"For stealing three hundred head of C Bar S steers, which are now hidden in a blind valley on the Box V, we, the undersigned, set our hands to this complaint.

"John (Shifty) Randall
"Hank Steffins
"Crag Stevens
"Bob Rollins, sheriff of Hardin County."

The young sheriff finished reading and opened his fingers. The warrant fluttered slowly to the ground, and Boss La Verne took it for a signal. His long-fingered white hands slapped down in the red glow of the setting sun, blurring with practiced speed.

Young Bob Rollins moved like heat lightning which flashes before the thunder is heard. His right hand dipped down with fingers shaped from ten years of daily practice. The long barrel snouted over the cutaway holster just as his thumb caught the hammer and slipped the smooth metal.

Flame splashed from the blue muzzle, and then a sullen roar snuffed out the fire. Boss La Verne jerked back under bullet shock, but his twin guns were still buried in holster leather. Both guns bellowed to send slugs through the bottoms of his scabbards, and then the big man caught his balance and coughed.

Young Bob Rollins was crouching forward, with the hell of wasted years blazing from his steel-blue

eyes. He caught the bucking gun high and eared back on the recoil for a second shot, one that would not be needed.

Boss La Verne was swaying like a reed in the wind. His staring black eyes closed, and then he measured his length with both hands frozen on his twin guns. Bob Rollins sighed, and straightened up with a smoke ring widening out above his head.

"The name is Bob Rollins, neighbors," he said very gravely, and every hard-bitten cowman in the crowd nodded in silent agreement.

Bob Rollins stepped between two buildings and followed a hurrying figure just rounding the office of the jail. He broke into a run and caught up with Bobbie Stevens under the drooping branches of a pepper tree, and the girl faced him when he called softly.

"Bobbie, I want to talk to you!"

The girl wiped her eyes and hid her face in the hollow of his shoulder. She was trembling like a deer that has escaped the hunter's gun, and her little hands gripped his arms until the trembling had stopped.

"I made Lefty—I mean old Bob—a promise," the new sheriff murmured deep in his throat, and she could feel the rumbling vibrations in his powerful chest. "I promised to clear his name!"

"I know, Bob," the girl murmured. "You cleared three names at the same time. You and I were both named after the finest sheriff Hardin County ever elected. Except one," she added with a note of pride in her throaty voice.

"Meaning old Crag, yore dad," Bob Rollins said softly.

"I don't," the girl contradicted soberly. "Dad told me that you were partners with us in the C Bar S, and it wasn't dad I meant."

His arms went about her tightly. "I'll be riding out to sit up with you, little pard," he murmured. "Someday when we are better acquainted again—"

"Could we know each other any better?" the girl whispered. "You'll come out tonight?"

"It's a promise," he told her, and then lowered his lips close to her ear. "This other feller who was the finest sheriff?" he insisted.

"His real name is young Bob Rollins," the girl whispered.

INDIANS AND WHEELS

GREAT ingenuity was shown by the early American Indian in transporting his goods from place to place; and as he was always more or less on the move, it is surprising that he never thought of such a simple contrivance as the wheel.

This aid to locomotion seems to have been known to nearly all other races from earliest times. The American Indian never had wheels. This has been proved by the fact that not a single wheel has ever been found among the many other articles of domestic and industrial uses dug up from ruins anywhere on this continent.

So far as known, the first wheels to rotate on American soil were brought across the Atlantic by Columbus or by his adventurers, who came here shortly after his discovery of the New World.

The Indians did not take kindly to the wheel for a long time after it was introduced to them, preferring their own methods of transportation to the oxcarts of the Europeans.

THE WHISTLIN' KID CROSSES THE CREEK

By EMERY JACKSON

That crossin' takes him into hell's half acre — an' to a showdown with gun-totin' rustlers who have the Kid's name written on their slugs.

THE WHISTLIN' KID CROSSES THE CREEK

By Emery Jackson

THERE was a sudden commotion at the far end of the big room where the Kid sat, softly whistling an accompaniment to the orchestra of guitars, fiddles, harmonicas, and drums. There was no leader beating time. The musicians were not professionals. But they played in lively time and rhythm that was making a success of the dance given by the Range Riders Social Club.

The dance was being held upstairs in the hall over the general store, used by lodges and public entertainments like the present one. The Kid knew that six-guns were barred. He had given up his own to the ticket taker downstairs, and seen it parked with others in a closet.

There was a fight starting, but without guns it should not amount to more than a brawl. Already the waddies in charge of the dance were hurrying across the floor to where the disturbers faced each other.

The Kid had been in town for two days. He knew the blond puncher who had been dancing with the girl, whose hair was black and curly, and who was not far from being the belle of the ball. The young cowpoke was Lee Terry, son of the owner of the T Square spread.

The one facing him, dark of skin as the Kid—and like the Kid with features that suggested Indian ancestry—was Chuck Curry, *segundo* of the Bar C. The Kid knew that, despite his own hawkish features, his black, straight hair and deer-brown eyes, he was one hundred per cent white American. But he would have been willing to wager plenty that Chuck Curry was a breed, half or quarter.

Curry was pretty well drunk and quarrelsome, too. Evidently he had tried to dance with Terry's girl, and she, as well as Terry, had rebuffed him.

The Kid was a stranger in Muralla. He had bought a ticket for the Range Riders dance and had gone there solo, meaning to use the opportunity to look over the bosses and waddies who were sure to patronize the occasion. He did not feel it was up to him to interfere, except in emergency, with others already moving to stop the row.

Then he saw that it might be bigger than he thought. Sides were being taken. Punchers, the Kid took to be employees of Terry, were getting ready to side him. Other rannies were lining up with Curry.

The music stopped. Girls and women were getting hurriedly out of the way. Terry had thrust his own girl behind him, but she stayed close, furious with Chuck Curry.

Terry said something the Kid did not catch, and Curry's dark face suddenly convulsed with fury. He swung at Terry, but Lee ducked, stepped in and brought up a hard jab that landed high on Curry's cheek. It rocked him and he retreated, coming back with a knife glittering in his hand.

He struck. There was a cry from the girl as Terry swayed, his sleeve slit, stained red. The blade had struck bone, and the nerve shock staggered him.

Then, as the rest closed in, Chuck Curry threatened them with his knife, from which crimson drops were falling. He swung it in a reckless arc, his face like that of a wolf, and they gave way as he rushed for the door.

The Kid forged through the men who blocked his path as they shrank from the threatening knife, but Curry was on the landing before the Kid got close to him.

Curry jerked his knife in an underhand sweep that forced the Kid to leap aside, barely missed by the murderous steel. Curry flung himself headlong at the stairs, going down in great leaps.

At the bottom he demanded his gun, and, when the man hesitated, slugged him on the jaw, then reached past him for his belt and holstered hogleg, buckling it about him as the Kid came sliding down the handrail.

Crash!

Fire flamed and spat from the muzzle of Curry's .45. Lead slapped into a banister, and the bellow of the heavy-caliber gun echoed up the stairs to where the men crowded, unarmed, unwilling to follow the lead of the Kid.

The Kid plunged off the end of the handrail like a diver from a springboard. His feet struck Curry in the chest, sent him sprawling through the door, which had been left open because of the warmth of the night.

For the second time Curry fired from the hip. He was as quick as a panther, landing in a crouch on his feet and one hand, and instantly pulling the trigger.

The Kid felt the hot breath of the slug as it almost creased his cheek. The ticket taker, a townsman, was in a panic. He had slammed the door of the shallow closet that held the guns, and he stood with his back to it.

"What's all this?" he blurted out.

The Kid's dark eyes blazed as he yanked the man aside without an answer, opened the door and found his own six-gun. He did not bother with the belt, but plucked the hogleg from its sheath.

Then he bolted through the doorway.

He was too late. The ticket taker's blundering move had given Curry the lead he needed. The Kid heard the rapid beat of hoofs, and ran for his own buckskin, Speed. Now the others, grown bolder, were pelting down the stairs.

They got their guns and rushed out in confusion, shouting to each other, some going for their horses that were hitched to two racks along both sides of the alley beside the building.

"Which way did he go?" "Is he headin' fer the crick?"

The Kid vaulted to the back of his buckskin and once more found his way blocked by men forking their mounts. He had a hunch that some of these were Curry's friends, striving to help his getaway, and at the same time leave the place themselves.

The building was well on the outskirts of the town. Across the creek was dense chaparral, merging in mesquite. Curry had got away. There was some talk of riding to the Bar C, but Lee Terry himself vetoed that.

Someone had put a tourniquet around his arm, with a bandage below that, and he came down the

stairs to join the milling group of men on foot and on horseback.

"This is *my* bisness," he said firmly. "He ain't hurt me bad. It'll heal soon, an' then I'll settle matters with Chuck Curry. Ain't no sense raisin' ructions out to the Bar C. You'll only bring the gal's name into it. Thar's no sense to thet. I'll take it up with thet skulkin', steel-flashin' chuckawaller later on."

"Terry's right," said an older man. "It's his rodeo. Chuck's lit out with his *compadres.* None of 'em belong to the Range Riders. They're a dirty outfit. Next time they don't git to buy tickets. No use bustin' up this dance. Lee, you'd best let Doc Niles take a look at thet wing of yourn. It wasn't none of the gal's fault. Chuck hawned in. Let's git back."

The crowd started to dismount, to filter back to the hall.

The older man turned to the Kid and spoke:

"I'm Sievers, of the Pine-tree spread. You sure moved pronto, hombre. Curry didn't git a chance to hit you—good. I'm goin' down to doc's with Lee. You want to come along? We could h'ist one on the way, at the Maverick. Won't do Lee no harm, or us neither."

The Kid hitched Speed again with the other horses, now returned to the rack. Then he walked down the street with Sievers and Lee Terry to the Maverick Saloon. But he declined the whiskey that the other two ordered.

"I ain't drinkin' till I'm votin' age," said the Kid pleasantly. "After that I'll decide whether I need it."

Sievers looked at him approvingly.

"Pilgrim on this range, I reckon," he said. "If you're huntin' a pay roll, I kin find use fer you on the Pine-tree. You kin ride out with me tonight."

The Kid thanked him and accepted the invitation. He didn't tell Sievers, or Terry, that he knew a lot about their affairs, or what his own business was on the Muralla range. That could come later.

"Chuck Curry's a quarter Piute, an' another quarter Mex'," said Sievers. "He's *segundo* fer the outfit he's with. The C stands fer Chadwick. He's a tenderfoot who come into the spread by inheritance from his uncle about three years ago. Thought he'd like to try ranchin'. Curry's been runnin' the spread, an' now Chadwick's gone back East, likely to stay there, from what I hear. Chuck sure pulled the wool over his eyes."

Sievers ordered a second round, which Terry insisted on paying for. The Kid took a second cigar.

"Chuck's got a bunch of Mexies workin' fer him," Sievers went on. "Fired most of the old hands. It ain't what you'd call a savory crowd. To me they stink like a lot of thievin' coyotes."

He stopped talking about the Bar C, abruptly. The Kid guessed why, but did not say anything.

They left the Maverick and roused out Doc Niles, who cleaned the knife slash in Terry's arm and dressed it.

"You'll be right as rain in June," he told Terry. "Keep thet hand up. Use the sling. I didn't put it on for ornament. No more dancing tonight. Best get home and turn in."

He turned to the Kid.

"Your face looks kind of familiar," he said. "Seems to me I've seen it before."

"Don't seem likely," said the Kid easily. But he wasn't so sure of that. Young as he was, his face

was getting to be pretty well known, though he tried to avoid it.

They went back to the dance and Terry introduced the Kid to the curly-haired girl. The Kid gathered that they were sweethearts. He told her what the doctor had said, and danced with her once.

He liked her, though he didn't have much use for girls, or any time for them either. But he was a good dancer.

Terry asked him to visit the T Square spread.

"A week from now, we'll both be thar to welcome you," he said. "Sally and I aim to be married next Thursday. Thet was one reason why I objected strenuous to Curry tonight. He had the nerve to try an' go with her, a while back, in spite of what she told him. An' him a breed."

The girl put a hand on Terry's arm, not the wounded one.

"You're not going to pick a quarrel with him, Lee," she pleaded.

"You'll have to let me tend to thet, honey! But I won't go out of my way to do it," Terry relented, watching her face.

Sievers got together the rannies of his own spread, told them he was leaving, and warned them not to drift in too late.

Then he and the Kid forked their hulls and rode through the quiet night to the Pine-tree headquarters.

II.

Sievers looked from the credentials the Kid showed him to the Kid himself, studying the hawkish features, the firm chin and steady eyes, that could be fierce and questing, like the eyes of a ranging eagle.

"You sure acted sharp at the dance," he said. "I've read about you in the 'Sociation Bulletin, Prentiss, an' I reckon you've earned your rep, but you seem mighty young fer a range dick."

The Kid said nothing. He had heard the same thing before.

He was known to many as The Whistlin' Kid, because of a habit that had become almost automatic. His real name was Pete Prentiss, and, for all his youth, he was the ace range detective of the Cattlemen's Protective Association, here in Muralla in answer to a call for assistance against long riders and owl-hooters, who had been raiding herds with ever increasing boldness.

The Kid had never had any idea of acting, or seeming to act, as a rider for the Pine-tree. His object in accepting Sievers' invitation was to have a quiet talk with him. Those who had heard Sievers' offer of a job and later learned that the Kid hadn't accepted it, would take the Kid for a typical ranny, not too anxious to work while he had a few dollars in his pocket.

He had picked up a few things hanging round Muralla, listening, more than talking. His knowledge of Spanish had come in handy in the Mexican quarter, where he had eaten two or three times, trying his luck at Spanish Jack in the cantinas.

"I dunno as I kin help you out much," Sievers said. "We got a good sheriff, an' he picked his own depities. They're good lawmen, but they work best in town. They ain't too hot as trailers. And our own boys ain't ever been able to trace sign.

"The foothills is plumb full of places to hold steers fer brand fakin'. There's plenty surface schist an' shale to fog sign. The southern end of the county touches the border, an' plenty of buyers on the fur side'll buy good beef cheap, an' not bother about bills of sale or regis-

tration. There's no brand agent to bother with either. It sure makes you sore to know your steers are bein' sold at half price by skunks thet are too lazy to raise stock themselves.

"There's too many Mexies in Muralla an' on the spreads. It's the only labor we kin git fer workin' crops fer winter feed. You know how it is. They all stick tergether. If they tell you anything you kin bet it's most likely lies, but they pass out plenty gossip among themselves."

The Kid nodded, rolling a quirly and lighting it.

"One thing is kinder cur'ous," Sievers went on. "They allus pick moonlight nights. Of co'se you kin haze steers faster on a clear night, but you'd think rustlers'd prefer a dark one. These hombres is different. They're snakes thet strike without warnin'. We all used to ride night herd, but they've killed three herders an' crippled three more.

"Seems they hide out in the brush —some of 'em—an' bushwhack the night herds, while the rest wait till they're out of the way, an' then swoop down an' drive off the primes. We had a notion we might sort of play thet game ourselves, but when we did the raid would come off some other place. They wear hoods, too. Most of us is short-handed, an' you don't like to ask men to risk a'most certain death. I tell you, Prentiss, they dang nigh got us licked."

The Kid nodded again. This business of the rustlers picking moonlight nights interested him. There was some reason for it that he didn't yet see. But he had a hunch it meant something.

He heard Sievers' men come in from town and go to the bunkhouse before he left and rode back to Muralla. Sievers pressed him to stay overnight, but the Kid refused. It was well on toward morning when he started, and dawn had broken as he loped into Muralla.

Muralla Creek flowed out of the foothills and circled the cow town. The Kid looked at it as he crossed the bridge. In the East it would have been called a river. Though it was not navigable, it was often wide and shallow, with low, rocky falls, and rapids with here and there quicksands.

He was whistling his favorite tune, "The Cowboy's Lament," as he rode through the Mexican quarter, on his way to his hotel and Speed's stable.

A band of men rode out from a corral beside one of the cantinas. They had the air of those who had been whooping it up, and came galloping toward him with yells, spreading out across the wide, dusty street, spurring their mounts.

They seemed intent on herding the Kid aside, but he held on, not looking for trouble, but not willing to be ridden off. Speed was too smart to be bumped.

The moon had set. The day was gray enough for him to see that most of them were Mexies, and to recognize their leader. Chuck Curry of the Bar C.

Curry knew the Kid, flung an oath at him, called to the men nearest to him in Spanish. It was the same as English to the Kid—an order to crowd him. He tickled the buckskin with his rowels, raced through the closing gap.

One of the men, a Mexie, yelled out: "Chinga, Cabron," and slashed at Speed with his quirt.

The Kid kneed Speed, leaned from his saddle and smashed the Mexie under the jaw, almost lifting

him from his seat, and leaving him dizzy, clutching leather.

The Mexie on the Kid's left grabbed for his shirt, and the Kid caught his arm at the wrist, twisting it hard. The Mexie yelped with pain, pitched to the ground as Speed leaped clear.

A bullet plucked at the Kid's Stetson. He was sure it was Curry who had fired, but he did not return the shot. The gap between him and the others widened. Dust rose between them, too. The Kid let the shot go. He had a notion that there might be a later and better opportunity to talk turkey with Curry. Just now it didn't suit his plans to start a ruckus with a drunken mob.

Apparently they had been hitting it up in town all night, but the Kid didn't fail to notice that their horses were coated with sweat-caked dust, acting as if they had been ridden hard and far, rather than waiting in a corral while their owners made merry.

Nor did he miss the point that they seemed intent on letting that part of town know they were leaving at dawn.

He figured there was an answer to that somewhere, and he found it when he got up, around noon, and went to get his breakfast at the Chinese restaurant.

The town was buzzing with the news that Lee Terry's T Square spread had been raided the night before.

Not only steers had been driven off, but cows and yearlings. Two range bulls had been deliberately shot.

Terry, on the brink of marriage—to the girl Chuck Curry had wanted—was facing ruin. The Kid put the talk he heard together. Terry had spent his savings on establishing his herd, making his ranchhouse ready for his bride. His credit had been good and he had borrowed from the bank. Now those notes had to be met. There was a lot of sympathy for Terry, but nobody seemed to link up the rustling with the fact that Curry had knifed him, tried to murder him.

Curry and his men would have an alibi. Everybody in the cantina, the Kid knew well, would be ready to swear that the Bar C outfit had been there, drinking and gambling all night. No doubt they had put in an earlier appearance.

It was an old trick, but it worked well. To the Kid, such alibis were not worth a dime a dozen, but they stood up in court.

The Kid had no proof to back his hunch—except that it was a moonlight night, that the Bar C horses, when he'd seen them, had seemed ridden hard, and that Curry had a grudge against Terry and another against the Kid.

These things might tie up. The Kid thought they would.

But he had to get more proof—plenty of it. And it was going to be hard to obtain—according to Sievers.

He knew, before he started out for the T Square spread, that whatever sign the rustlers had left would be blotted out before the stolen cattle had traveled far.

That was the sort of problem the Kid loved. Solving them had established his reputation. He was getting to be a little too well known, nowadays. He had to appear in court occasionally, even though he always turned his cases over to local officers. Now and then the papers mentioned him and sometimes printed his picture.

It meant, ultimately, his transfer to distant territory. In the meantime he did not think that anyone

in Muralla knew who or what he was.

Curry knew only that he had interfered at the dance, and that merely added for the Kid a private zest to the untangling of this riddle.

Curry, the Kid believed, had deliberately tried to break up the wedding, to bankrupt Lee Terry.

If he was well organized to do that, he was also well organized to have made other raids.

III.

The Kid found Sievers at the T Square. Terry's girl was also there. She and Terry were downcast. The girl looked as if she had been crying. The T Square riders, four of them, had not gone out, but stood around despondently, seeming to figure that they had lost their jobs.

The Kid had asked Sievers not to mention the fact that he was a range dick, but as Terry greeted the Kid, remembering him for what he had done at the dance, Sievers forgot his promise.

"This is the detective they've sent us from the 'Sociation, Lee," he said. "Prentiss. He's got a big rep."

"You ain't likely to increase it none this trip," said Terry bitterly, while the girl stared at the Kid wide-eyed. She was about the Kid's own age. "The boys come in about an hour ago. Them rustlin' snakes is sure crafty. They hazed my stock into what we call Manzanilla Gulch, an' kivered their tracks by settin' it afire. They sure blotted thet sign. Seein' the smoke this mornin' was how we come to find out I'd been raided. I'm cleaned out—wuss'n thet. I'm hogtied in debt. Curry done this!"

The Kid told them he had seen Curry and his men leaving town early that morning.

"He'll have an alibi thet's hard to break," he said.

"Allus does," Sievers put in. "We've suspected him, previous, but he's a slick one at trickery. It's tough on you, Terry, on you an' Anne. But you ain't licked."

"I ain't lyin' down—if thet's what you mean," said Terry. "But they'll sell me out. Plenty of folks would like to git this spread on a bargain. The bank'll put it up an' someone'll bid it in at ha'f its value. Might even be Curry. I'll have to git me a job as top hand to pay off the rest of my debts. I ain't goin' to be able to git married. I—"

He turned away and tears came into the girl's eyes.

"Which way does thet gulch lie," the Kid asked one of the rannies, "or is she still smokin'?"

The ranny pointed out the way. "She's burned out now," he added. "We hunted round both ends, but she's all rimrock an' shale. You won't find sign enough to trail a worm."

The Kid was not discouraged, even when he heard the girl saying: "He seems awful young to be a range dick," and a waddy answering: "Bet he ain't cast a vote or stropped a razor yit."

He was used to such things. He rather enjoyed them, sure of his own abilities. This crowd was downhearted by what had happened. They had forgotten how the Kid had tackled things at the dance. This was a greater catastrophe.

The Kid was range born and ranch bred. He knew cow critters. And he applied a nimble brain to his problems.

Firing the scrub to blot out sign was smart enough, but he had a strong idea that the stolen herd was

being driven toward the border. That meant that the creek would have to be crossed, and there were not many places where that could be done.

Cows were swimmers but they were not willing ones, and they were pretty clumsy, compared to horses. They never fought against the current. They grew panicky if they struck quicksand.

The place to look for sign, the Kid told himself, as he headed for Manzanilla Gulch, was somewhere between the southern end of it and the creek. Blotted sign was sure to be revealed sooner or later. It was a matter for wide casting, or to be handled by common-sense reasoning.

The fact that cows and steers had been taken, bulls killed, only scrub stock left, showed it up as a revenge job to the Kid.

The raiders had several hours' start, but they would have to hold the stock this side of the border for two or three weeks, while the T Square brand was doctored and the scabs dropped off the fake.

The Kid figured out combinations of the way T Square could be altered. There were several. It was an easy brand to change.

The gulch ran roughly north and south, and he headed for the lower end. The fire had burned out completely. Charred boughs of the tough scrub stuck out of the ashes clear to its southern lip. There the shale stretched far.

He figured that the stock had been driven down into the gulch, and through it, to keep the cattle out of sight and prevent some waddy short-cutting late after the dance from getting a glimpse of them. They might have been held there for a while.

But not, he thought, for long. Not until the moon was low. The moonlight was used for something else than ordinary purposes. He was sure of that.

The slope out of the gulch was smooth enough to be used as a trail. Ashes covered any sign that might have been left on it, and none showed on the shale—none that the sharp eyes of tracking rannies could detect. Those of the Kid were sharper, however, more expert.

The sun was high and showed no shadows that might help him to detect fractures or displacements of the shale, but he found them anyway, dismounted, and got down on hands and knees. The shale was not level. Weather had decomposed it, and some spots were more decrystallized than others. The split hoofs of the cattle had not done much to the surface, but here and there, far apart, the metal shoes of horses had slightly displaced it.

These were small, widely scattered clues, but the Kid put them together and got a picture of men riding at swing and drag of a hurrying herd, going south. There were no breaks to show a point rider, which was curious. That, too, meant something, like the rustlers' choice of a full moon on the nights they were active.

The land dipped down toward the distant creek. He could see the gleam of its water against the bluffs on its far side.

The ground was irregular, poor grazing, mostly sage and greasewood, with prickly pear on rocky ridges and little bunch grass. But the sign was plainer, and showed hurry. If the Kid's hunch was right that haste had been to give them time to set up their alibi.

He trailed the sign down to the creek and found where the herd had been held on the bank. Tracks led

to the water's edge, but he was sure they had not entered the water. It flowed swift and strong, and, lower down, foamed amid boulders in a rapids that meant sure death for man or beast.

There were no returning tracks. The sign led here and ended.

The Kid made certain, testing the current by riding in a little way. The bottom shelved abruptly to deep water over slippery ledges. He had to dismount and grab a bough to help Speed back to land. And where the buckskin could not go it was certain that no other horse, or steer, had made the crossing under its own power. They would have been swept down to the rapids before they got halfway.

The idea of a ferry came to him, and he did not entirely discard it, though he felt that such a process would take hours. But he marked a beach on the far side that would make a good landing. There were trees by the beach and a gap in the bluffs.

The Kid looked around and spied a cottonwood whose trunk had been rasped through the bark. Fragments of hemp fiber clung, as if a cable had been fastened there. It convinced the Kid that the answer lay across the creek, that somehow the herd had crossed it.

He rode two miles upstream before he found a place where he could get over, wading beside Speed. It was none too easy to do, at that. On the far side, he rode downstream to the beach he had noticed and found another tree with the bark chafed in the same way.

Now the sign was plain, leading up the gap. His hunch was right, but he did not follow it immediately. He figured that the rustlers would be sleeping late. In a side gulch he discovered the final answer to the crossing in the objects hidden beneath the brush—planks, small, sturdy scows, ropes and other things.

The rustlers had set up a pontoon bridge. The force of the current could be used to swing a scow at the end of a rope, from one side to the other. Other punts, flat-bottomed and sturdy, could be swiftly assembled by the men who had used them many times. Heavy planks made the bridge, held by bolts dropped into sockets. Stanchions were set up and light wire cable rigged through eyes in their tops, as guard lines.

Such a contrivance would curve somewhat with the current, however strongly moored to the cottonwoods, but evidently anchors were used to steady it, heavy rocks attached to rope moorings. A bridge like that could be used by soldiery, cavalry, even light artillery.

But it would not be an easy job, ordinarily, to persuade steers and cows to cross a floating platform.

The answer was plain to the Kid and it brought with it the reason for moonlight nights. The rustlers used a lead steer, such as were owned by trail herds—a selected ox which the rest would follow as sheep trail a bellwether. Animals like that were kept for many years, turned out on the range when they got old, valuable aids to a trail boss, many of them handed down by name in range history.

Encouraged by the lead steer and the bright moonlight—that was how the stolen cattle crossed Muralla Creek.

There was a plateau at the head of the gap. The mesalike formation was split and eroded into a little park. There were grass, water,

shade. The park was roughly oval and at one end, the natural entry, poles were set.

The Kid dismounted, snaked through brush to the rimrock, and used his binoculars on the grazing stock. The brands, not yet doctored, were all T Square but one. This was on the lead steer, grazing apart, a superior officer. Its flanks and shoulders showed vented brands and one new one, Bar C.

It seemed to have been bought legitimately enough.

There was a rough log shack, a corral, but no signs of men. They would be coming before long, the Kid thought, to fake the brands. A few strokes of a running iron would shift T Square to Gridiron.

He made his way down, shifted the poles, replaced them, and rode into the park. The herd looked at him, went on grazing. At the shack the Kid saw bunks, blankets, a stove, and provisions. This was a regular hide-out. And the lead steer, aside from other proof, tied it up with Curry.

There was a back door, and a lean-to into which the Kid led Speed after watering him, leaving him with the measure of grain he always carried for the buckskin. Those regular oats helped to maintain Speed's right to his name, his superiority over ordinary cow ponies.

The door of the shack was open. The Kid left it so, placing a rough stool a little way back from it. There he seated himself, softly whistling, waiting for the stock thieves to arrive.

He knew that the palms of rustlers always itched for money. The sooner the brands were faked and healed, the sooner they would be driven over the border and the dinero acquired.

The question of odds did not come into his reckoning. He could have gone back to the T Square, collected owners, riders, the sheriff and his posse. But he didn't, and it wasn't because he wanted the glory—he would give the sheriff all the credit—but this was the way he liked to work, solo.

He had an account to settle with Curry personally, too.

IV.

Five riders loped into the park. The Kid had expected about that number, figuring they would be bound to leave some of the outfit on the Bar C to give the idea to any visitors that the spread was in full swing, bolstering their alibi.

The five were taking it easily, jesting and calling to each other, sure of their hide-out. Curry was in the lead. They drew rein some distance from the shack and he gave orders.

Two of them started shaking out their ropes. The other two started to make a fire. That was for the running irons. The ropes were for the steers they would throw and hogtie for rebranding.

The Kid had found a half full, wicker-covered jug back of the stove and smelled its contents. It was tequila. Curry came on toward the shack, no doubt for a drink. The Mexie in him would make tequila his favorite tipple.

The Kid had rather hoped for something like this. If he got the leader the others would be easier to handle. They were busy outside, cutting out their first steer, tending the fire and irons.

Curry dismounted, ground-reined his horse and came through the open door, humming a tune. Under

his breath the Kid whistled the "Lament."

Curry headed straight for the jug, lifting it on a crooked elbow as the Kid closed the door softly and dropped its wooden bar into place.

Curry whirled, glaring like a trapped wolf as he saw the Kid's six-gun.

"What in hell are *you* doin' here?" he challenged. "How did you *git* here?"

"I didn't bother to rig the pontoon bridge, Curry. Thet's a smart trick, like burnin' out the gulch—but not good enough. My name's Prentiss. I'm from the C. P. A. Put down thet jug—easy. Unbuckle your belt an' let it drop—easy. Now back up to the wall. Grab fer the ceilin', you ornery reptile! You don't ruin Lee Terry an' bust up his weddin' this trip. You're goin' to marry the hangman's daughter. Reckon you know who *she* is—the gallows."

Curry obeyed, mouthing silent oaths that did not pass his dry lips. His eyes were vicious. He raised his hands, with twitching, curling fingers.

"Thet's right, Curry. Now turn back to the wall an' bring your hands back of you." The Kid fished in a hip pocket for the whang strings he carried there. They were better than handcuffs.

Curry's fingers turned into hooks. They plunged between two of the logs for the knife set there for an emergency. He flung the *cuchillo* as he dived headlong for the Kid's legs.

The Kid's six-gun blasted as the keen blade struck his shoulder, going deep through the space between collarbone, shoulder blade, and ribs. It grated on the bones, shocking the Kid's nerves to temporary paralysis.

The Kid's slug had parted Curry's hair. It blasted off his hat, grooving the top of his skull as his hands grasped the Kid's ankles and the Kid, staggering back, tripped and went over backward, the knife still in him.

Curry was crawling forward, half conscious, trying to reach his knife. Life was jetting, flowing in a scarlet stream from the Kid's shoulder. He summoned his strength, but his hogleg seemed to weigh a ton. He lifted his knees, spread them as Curry crawled on, his breath foul as the intent of his mind.

The Kid got a scissors hold about Curry's middle, tried to clamp the wind out of him, but the pith seemed gone out of his legs.

Curry's fingers tipped the haft of the knife, twisted the blade in the wound.

"You die, you cursed gringo!" he muttered.

His face was crimson-streaked, his mouth dribbled as his hand closed about the haft of the *cuchillo* to pluck it out and slash the Kid's jugular vein.

The Kid jerked his body aside, found strength in his extremity to lift his six-gun, brought the muzzle down back of Curry's ear, and, as Curry sagged, senseless now, thrust off the weight of his body and got up.

He went to the window and saw the two Mexies by the fire staring uncertainly at the shack. They had heard the shot, but were not sure what it was. One of them shouted to the two who had roped a steer. He pointed at the shack.

The Kid took his neckerchief, plugged his wound. It was only a temporary job. The two Mexies left the tied steer and came slowly on foot toward the shack, calling

to Curry. The other followed them cautiously. They did not seem too keen about it. They did not like the closed door, and the fact that there was no answer to their shouts.

They grouped, consulting, seeming to decide that Curry must have had an accident. For they came on again warily as the Kid slipped through the back door, mounted Speed, and rode around the side of the shack just as they tried the door and found it barred.

They stood with dropped jaws, astounded, when he hailed them in Spanish.

"Your chief is done for," he said. "You can quit or swallow lead. Afterward you can talk, and maybe you won't have to hang—all of you. I'm not promising anything."

In their surprise they did not at first figure him as being alone. Now they saw that he was wounded. The side of his shirt was soaked with crimson. The Kid saw their eyes shine and their teeth suddenly gleam as they jumped aside, going for their knives. Only one of them toted a gun.

They were fast—but not fast enough.

The Kid shot from the saddle, wheeling Speed. A bullet smashed one Mexie's wrist. Another spun about and fell on his face. A third dropped with a broken thigh. The fourth started to run, changed his mind as the buckskin leaped in pursuit, and the Kid sent a slug through his sombrero.

He dropped to his knees, begging for mercy.

"I can use you," the Kid told him in Spanish. "Behave yourself, and it won't do you any harm."

"*Si, señor.* I will do all you wish, tell all." The man was cowed. He looked at his fallen comrades, knowing that Curry had also been conquered by this devil of a gringo with his flashing dark eyes and his hawk-like features.

Half an hour later the Kid rode out of the park. The five rustlers were all bound, tied separately to bunks so they could not get at each other's fastenings. The Kid tied the last one himself, after the Mexie had roped up the rest.

One was shot high in the chest, but the Kid did not think any of them mortally wounded. He was not bothering too much about that. Curry was still out. The Kid chuckled as he thought of what Curry would say when he came to, with his men all about him, helpless, waiting for the sheriff and his posse.

It was the Kid's left shoulder that was wounded. He rode with his left hand high, holding to his collar on the right side. He had cleaned the wound, plugged it afresh with moss, rinsed out his neckerchief and managed a bandage.

Speed went at an easy trot, and the Kid whistled the "Lament." The song told of the wind-up of a cowboy who knew he'd "done wrong," and, as on previous occasions, the Kid felt it was a tune that well fitted the circumstances.

They did not hand out medals in the service of the Cattlemen's Association, but the scar of his wound, when it healed, would be, to the Kid's way of thinking, a decoration. It was not the first of the sort he had received, nor would it be the last.

The Kid is right. A slug wound is the finest sort of decoration a gun-totin' lawman kin have. An' thar's other slugs on the trail ahead with the Whistlin' Kid's name written on 'em. Yuh'll meet up with him soon ag'in in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.

A Range Dweller's Plaint

By E. A. BRININSTOOL

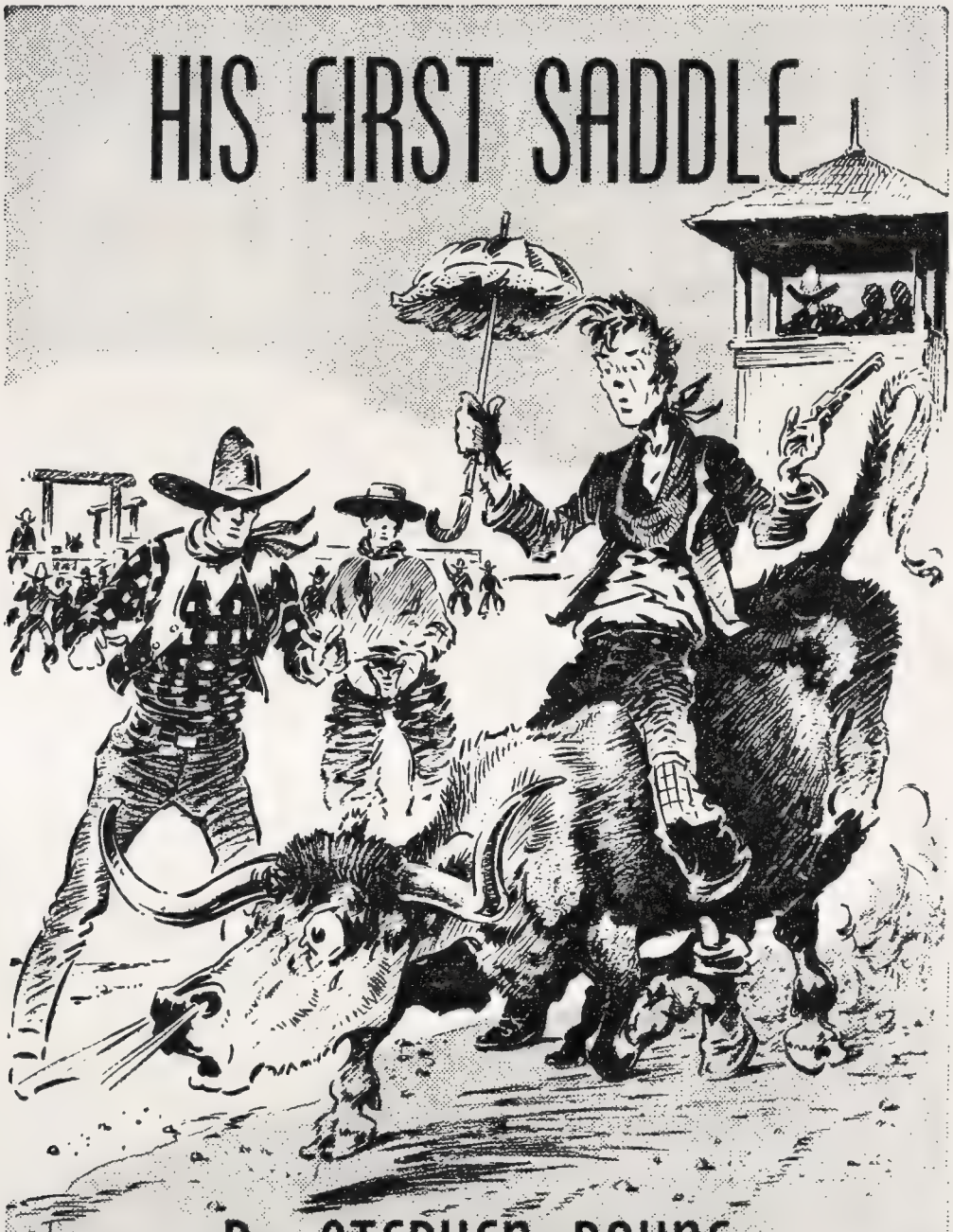
They sized me up like some strange beast
When I trailed through the distant East,
In high-heeled boots and Stetson hat,
And other duds that folks smiled at.
I sure was clean stampeded, too,
'Cuz everything was strange and new.
Them man-made canyons, steel and brick,
Shut out the sun and made me sick!
Me and the East, we don't agree—
It's sagebrush land, you bet, for me!

Doggoned if I could stand the way
Folks milled around me every day!
And every place I loped around,
I felt clean off my own bed ground!
I missed the coyote's lonely wail,
I missed my sagebrush-covered trail,
And ketched myself at times in tears,
Jest lonely for the cows and steers!
I'm mighty glad I'm back, by gee,
'Cuz cattle land's the land for me!

They thought I was a kind of freak—
A curly wolf from Bitter Creek!
They looked me over for a gun,
Dumfounded I wa'n't packin' one!
They reckoned I would whoop it nights,
Git locoed and shoot out the lights,
Or git out on some kind o' tear,
And raise the devil everywhere!
They was plumb sore at me, by jings,
Becuz I didn't do them things!

They called me green 'cuz I felt strange—
But git them fellers on the range,
Or ropin' in a brandin' pen,
And see who is the greenhorn then!
I wonder how they'd feel to climb
Aboard a bronc at roundup time,
From early morn till sunset fell,
And do a night-herd trick as well?
I reckon when they stopped to sup
They'd chaw their grub a-standin' up!

HIS FIRST SADDLE



By STEPHEN PAYNE

He was a rip-roarin' buckaroo an' hoss-breaker—an' the folks at thet red-hot rodeo gave him the hoss laugh.

HIS FIRST SADDLE

By Stephen Payne

IF ever a young buckaroo ached for to take part in a rodeo, ropin' calves and ridin' broncs high, wide and handsome, that feller was me—Harvey Allen Pickett. Trouble was, when I lit in this town of Wagon Track, which was puttin' on one humdingin' show, I had no friends and no dough. As for a cowboy outfit—not even a pair of boots of my own!

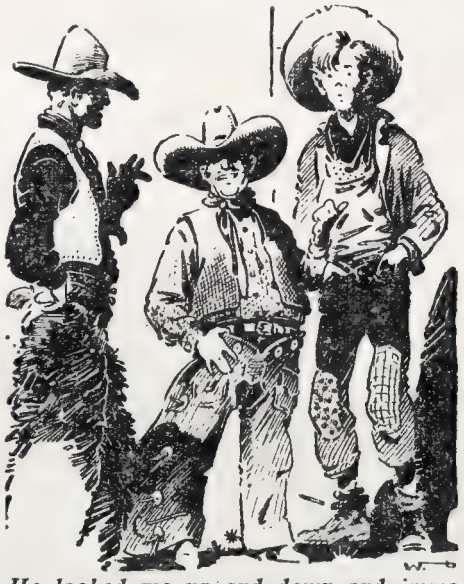
Boots! A pair was bein' shown in the dry-goods-store window that drawed me like a bucket draws a skim-milk calf. I froze against that window eatin' 'em up with my eyes, while on the street cowboys and cowgirls, ridin' prancin' hosses, wearin' fancier duds than I ever seen on the range, dashed about singin', laughin', an' joshin' each other.

Freighters, ranchers, miners, even a few sheepherders crowded the saloons and bumped into me on the plank sidewalk. Everybody was happy as young colts and whoopin' it up, except only me. I felt lost an' lonely, not fittin' into this gay crowd a-tall. Howsoever, as always in a crisis I remembered one of the axioms of the great Pickett family handed down by my dad and granddad and great-granddad:

"A Pickett keeps his chin up; never admits he's licked."

Thus bolstered, I hiked my sore feet out across the sagebrush to where at was the arena, corrals, grandstand and racetrack. Them corrals was full of wild hosses and snorty calves and steers offen the range which maybe'd never polished their horns on a corral fence afore.

Cowpunchers and other men on foot were buzzin' around gettin' the last details arranged for the contests; it bein' afternoon as I knew from the feel of my neglected innards. Three important-lookin' men, officials maybe, were bunched at the judges' stand near the bronc chute. So I asked one of 'em was he the boss?



He looked me up and down and immejitly found something to laugh about.

He had to look way up to find my freckled face, him bein' short, and me bein' long, and when he had looked me up and down he imme-

jitly found somethin' to laugh about, which is so doggoned often the case when I meet up with a stranger.

"My stars, men," he gasped, "d'you see what I see? A human beanpole with six inches of bare shanks showin' under his overalls, a neck like a rope and the wildest shock of flame-red hair as ever sprouted on a human head. Ain't he a beaut?"

Colorin' up and tryin' to think of somethin' cuttin' to squelch him, I said, "Aw," and dug the toe of my plow shoe in the dirt. Then I blurted: "Gents, I walked the grub line to get here for this rodeo. But, since I ain't got the entrance fees now, I'll pay 'em after I've won."

Never have I seen three men less interested. They told me to drag it away from the corrals and out of the arena, pronto.

Well, plenty down in the mouth, I was shufflin' acrost that arena and mutterin' aloud, "Boy! If I just had them boots!" when up to me dashed a big busy feller in a white hat and calfskin vest. He rode a swelligant white hoss and was rollin' a fat cigar atween his thick lips. And he ran his shrewd eyes over me without grinnin'!

"What boots?" he asked polite.

"Them in the store window. Fourth prize in the bronc-ridin' contest."

"Why don't you win 'em, Redhead?"

He was shore bein' friendly. But, feelin' proddy, I snorted, "Fat chance when them judges wouldn't let me enter nothin'. 'Count of no jack. Furthermore, the name ain't Redhead, ner Slats, ner yet Splinter. Already since I left home a heap of nicknames has been tied onto me. But I object the least to Pole, even though I s'pose it's short for Bean Pole or else means a fence rail."

Still Mr. White Hat didn't laugh, though his eyes began to twinkle. Says he: "You're a mighty interestin' ranny, Pole. Can you ride and rope?"

"Yuh bet-cha!"

"I'll bet-cha!" In that certain tone which let me know he didn't believe me.

So, forgettin' that I was layin' myself wide open for yet another nickname—Web Foot—I let that hombre know I'd come from Oregon. Warmin' up, I plunged on: "Shore I savvy range and rodeo stuff. Only I ain't had the practice it takes to make a top hand."

Sober of face, the man rolled his cigar. "O. K., Pole Pickett from Oregon. I'll see that you get some practice. I'm Con Bridgewell, arena director, and I'll fix things for you. The only string to my offer is that you're to do exactly as I tell you. Is that hunky?"

Somethin' was poundin' in my sorta thin chest. Was I dreamin' or was this real? "Gimme a chance to win them boots and I'll even polish yourn, Mr. Bridgewell," I almost whooped.

"It's a go!" He led me over to that judges' stand and left his hoss for me to hold while he climbed up and held a confab with the three hombres I'd met and I couldn't like much. They all eyed me mighty thoughtful. One laughed, another chuckled, and the third wagged his chin whiskers, sayin':

"Looks like you've saved the day for us, Bridgewell."

Bridgewell, rollin' his dead cigar, joined me, swung up to his saddle, and said: "All fixed, Pole. Stay here at the corrals with the regular contestants now. Wait for me to tell you when to take your turn."

Thrilled? Was I! Grateful, too. There I was rubbin' elbows with

real cowboys wearin' boots and spurs, white hats and black hats; men with chaps and men without; men with gaudy shirts and flowin' neckerchiefs, and men with plain workaday clothes. Hombres these contests were no novelty to, like they were to me, this bein' the first time I'd actually been a contestant!

I watched the grandstand fillin' up with the happy people, who jus' couldn't be half so happy as I was, and I watched Con Bridgewell dashin' here and there gettin' things in order. That big feller was more than just hunky. He was a hero!

All at once a man with a megaphone in the judges' stand was booming: "The great Wild West Rodeo of Wagon Track is off to a flying start. The first event is the cow-pony race on the track."

The crowd yelled and I couldn't help joinin' in with a "Yippee-ya-ow!" Then I looked up to see Con Bridgewell on his white hoss, holdin' out to me the lead rope of a mouse-colored burro.

"Quick, Pole. Hop on Mouse!" he barked, and gave me certain orders to carry out.

"Bu-bu-but—" I gulped, plain dazed.

"Do as I say!"

I didn't want to. But a Pickett stays with a bargain he has made. Whatever would I do when the goin' gets tough without them Pickett family axioms to call on?

Astraddle Mouse, the burro, I fuzzed out to the racetrack and immejitly that race had started, I galloped past the grandstand. Wavin' my ragged hat and with my wild red hair loose in the wind, I brought the crowd to its feet.

Perhaps that Mouse all but slipped out from under me, and I had to throw both long arms round that burro's neck to stay on, with my shirt tail flyin' and legs wavin' this way and that, added to the "whoop-it-up" reception I got. I ain't sure.

Bridgewell seemed mighty pleased with the showin' I had made; the real cowboys, too, judgin' by the way they winked at one another and chuckled. Yet when I asked 'em blunt what I was s'posed to have done, the whole bunch seemed to be deaf. I kinda forgot how queer it

I galloped past the grandstand, wavin' my ragged hat and with my wild red hair loose in the wind.

all was while I watched the calf ropin' with my eyes buggin' outta my head.

I'd seen calves roped and tied down afore. But the way these contestant cowboys wrapped up their packages of beef left me gaspin'. In no time the half dozen rannies had done their stuff, and the contest was over except only for me. Con Bridgewell hadn't forgot I was to rope.

"Get your jackass over to the

startin' line at the calf chute, Pole," said he, handin' me a rope and a hoggin' string.

"Hey! I had orter have a saddle and a hoss," I up and told him, gettin' a little barb-wire 'bout this burro business.

"No. Use Mouse." He gave me directions what to do after I roped my calf. "Hop to it. You'll win!"

The megaphone blared: "Pole Pickett, from the tall timber of Oregon, now roping!"

I kicked that burro in the slats, pretty grim, to get him over to the calf chute. Hadn't a show of winnin', forkin' such a critter. Still I was gettin' my entrance fees paid and had no hoss of my own. So why kick? I could see the grandstand was on its feet once again, people clapping and cheerin'. A boomin' voice reached me:

"Thar's the red-headed funster again. Watch him do his stuff, folks. That gink's there with the goods!"

'Twas bully to be appreciated. But what'd the hombre mean—"funster"?

A wiry red calf sailed outta the chute. It had crossed the startin' line and it seemed to me like the starter's flag had been down a minute afore ever I could prod my mount into a lope. That burro wasn't never intended for swift work. Somehow, too, my rope, a reg'lar dishrag, was all in a snarl and I had to coil it over again, buildin' me a new loop.

Me and Mouse catched up with the red calf at the far end of the arena where the fence had stopped it. Plenty desperate 'cause time was runnin' past so quick, I tossed my loop and missed.

Mouse planted his front feet in the ground, ducked his head and over his ears I turned a somersault. It rammed my hat down over my eyes so I couldn't see nothin', but I shore could hear the gleeful howlin' of the crowd.

"Laugh darn yuh! Ijits!" I gritted, pickin' myself up, throwin' my hat away and plungin' after the calf on foot.

Footsore or not, big plow shoes or not, I could run faster'n that blamed stupid jackass. Hard to get my rope in shape to use again, but—

All of a sudden the red calf whirled on me. I'll always swear I saw the snort runnin' right outta that calf's nose a split second afore its head socked me.

Whamo! Hit in the mid section, I folded over on top o' the proddy

Whamo! Hit in the mid section, I folded over on top o' the proddy little cow brute.

little cow brute. The two of us went down in a cloud of dust; the grandstand whoopin' like Injuns on the warpath.

Grittin' my teeth, I yanked the hoggin' string from my belt and maybe it was on account of me bein'

sorta woozy, anyhow 'twas one of the calf's hind legs and my own right leg I got tied together. Next thing I knowed, the calf had slipped outta my fingers and bolted, a-dragging me.

But the hoggin' string came loose and I rose from the dust, found my hat and waved to the stampin', yellin' crowd. Game, even if I was a loser. "A Pickett is always game!"

Bridgewell loped up with Mouse and my rope. "Great work, Splinter! You're savin' the day for us."

"I can't see as I am. And the name ain't—"

"Climb your burro and get over yonder with the cowpunchers. The steer bulldoggin' is on."

Watchin' that bulldoggin' I sorta forgot my recent hard luck. A wild-eyed steer chargin' across the arena, a rider on its right, another swoopin' up on its left; a slap of "hurry-up sticks" and somebody yelling, "Hooey-hooey!" Sure does make your eyes snap and your pulses thump. Now the bulldogger bends from his saddle, grabs the steer's horns. His hoss is runnin' on all alone. The man's boot heels are plowin' the dirt. He's wrestlin' with eight hundred pounds of wild beef on the hoof! Boy! If only I could do that! Look. The steer's down with the bulldogger flat on his back under the spreadin' horns.

Suddenly Bridgewell was beside me once again, throwin' words at me:

"Hi, Long Gear, take this umbrella and this six-gun. It's loaded with blanks. Get out in the arena and—" He poured out directions.

Somethin' screwy about this, and I began to yammer a protest. But he cut me short. "Remember your part of the bargain, kid."

Leavin' Mouse, I sprinted out to the center of the arena, and up to a thrown steer which a bulldogger was ready to let loose. Umbrella in one hand, gun in the other, I straddled that steer. It lumbered to its feet and I hoisted the umbrella, wavin' it.

Next moment the critter piled me end over end. But sittin' up in the dust, I banged away with the six-gun at the retreatin' steer. And how the grandstand whooped. People must ha' thought it was funny.

Another steer had been downed and I ran over to get astraddle of it.

"By Hinkey's pup," I gasped to the brown-faced cowboy holdin' the critter, "this game's rough."

His white teeth flashed in a friendly grin. "You're doin' plumb noble, kid."

Praise from a cowhand! I felt heaps better about the goofy stunts. Again I got tossed; again the crowd went wild. Then Bridgewell on the white hoss loomed up through the dust.

"That'll be aplenty, Slivers."

"The name ain't—"

"Over to the bronc chutes. You're to ride first."

"And win that fourth prize, them boots, by gollies!"

Bridgewell was chucklin' about somethin'. "Maybe you'd refuse to ride a-tall if you waited till last," he remarked. "You see, this is a special kind of bronc-ridin' contest."

A special kind? Immejitly I saw the chunky bay hoss bein' saddled for me I knew that contest was sort of locoed. "Hey, you saddlers," I yelled, "that hoss is under the saddle wrong end to!"

"That's the way we ride 'em here," a cowboy told me without crackin' a grin. "Yuh face the

bronc's tail. Take this mouth organ and play 'Turkey in the Straw' while you ride."

My lower jaw felt like it had fallen plumb off. Hardly knowin' what I was doin', I grabbed the mouth organ, dropped the umbrella and six-gun, started to yowl a protest. But a couple of husky rannies hoisted me over the chute's side into the saddle.

The megaphone was bellerin': "Ladies and gentlemen, a rare treat in store for you. Pole Pickett, who has won your hearts and your applause, now coming out of Chute One, riding backwards on Sunfish!"

I heard the crowd roar; heard the rattle of the chute gate. Then I could hear nothin', see nothin'. Sunfish was out in the open buckin' like seven furies. That bronc was carryin' me backward across the arena, his tail swishin' right up in my face.

That bronc was carryin' me backwards, his tail swishin' right up in my face.

"Scratch 'im, Redhead!"

"Play us a tune, Slivers!"

My teeth and lips clamped on that darned mouth organ. I blew one shrill blast. That was all. I'd lost a stirrup, was floppin', bouncin' all over the saddle and all over the hoss. Suddenly the bronc wasn't under me at all. As I sailed through the air a voice registered on my whirlin' mind:

"Who said this show was goin' to be a dead flop because our reg'lar clown never showed up!"

A second boomin' voice added: "That red-headed kid's the best darned cowboy clown ever to hit Wagon Track!"

Kerplunk! I smacked ground, stertched out limp, feelin' like every bone was busted. But I wasn't killed, for my mind was workin'. "'Clown'! 'Cowboy clown'!" Why hadn't I tumbled sooner? A contestant, me? No! I'd been made the clown of the show. Con Bridgewell had made a fool and a laughin'-stock of me! Shamed, stung, I wanted to crawl in a gopher hole and pull the hole in after me.

But the crazy people in the grandstand had gone "plumb hog wild." Cheering, cheering the rodeo clown, whoopin' the name of Pole Pickett. Cowboys, all chucklin' and laughin', had surrounded me, were helpin' me to my feet.

I let drive at one hombre who asked if I was hurt and tore loose from others holdin' me upright. "Lemme outta here. If I never see Con Bridgewell again it'll be soon enough."

"Steady, son," soothed a stocky, sun-bronzed rider. "Con asked me to bring you these boots."

My eyes riveted on a pair of black boots exactly like them in the store window. Humdingers! How I wanted 'em! But—

"I didn't win 'em," I growled. "Didn't win nothin'."

"Your stunts and your *sand* won the crowd," the cowhand pointed out. "And you shore nuff earned them boots!"

Earned 'em! That made a big difference and suddenly I wasn't mad any more. "Lemme see if I can get my hoofs in 'em."

A minute later I had 'em on. They fitted my big feet like gloves. The first pair of cowboy boots I'd ever owned!

"Boys," I said sorta choky to the cowpunchers, "it's the grandest feelin' a feller ever had!"

Sand is one thing Harvey Allen Pickett has plenty of. He's a hombre who gits into lots o' trouble, an' knows how to git out o' it, too. His next adventure will be a humdinger. Look out fer it—in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly soon.

COWBOYS' FUN

In pioneer days, churches in the sparsely settled places of the West were very different from what they are today. Often they were old log cabins, lent for the occasion, or sheds, roughly thrown together to shelter the wood supply and the tools, and there were times when the sky was the roof and the ground was the seating place for any who cared to squat on it.

Cowboys were always ready to play a joke on anyone, and they did not spare even the preacher. Service was being held one Sunday morning in a small log cabin in Texas. The chinks between the logs were so large that one could throw a cat between any one of them without hurting the cat. The building was so small that the pulpit—a log stump upturned to hold the Bible—was placed smack against the back wall. It was this close contact that caused one visiting preacher some embarrassment for a few minutes.

A group of cowboys, happening to pass the back end of the cabin on their way to the service, saw a piece of greenish black cloth protruding from one of the chinks. They knew at once that this could be no other than part of the preacher's well-worn coat. They tore out a nail that was stuck in another log and fastened the piece of cloth firmly to the outside of the cabin.

At the end of the service, when the preacher started to leave, he found himself securely fastened to the log wall. After one tug had failed to release the coat tail, his sense of humor came to his relief, and banished any thought of anger. He slipped out of the coat and left the building in his shirt sleeves. As he stepped outside he was met by a man who was carrying the coat, and who presented it to him respectfully, saying: "The boys didn't mean no harm, Mr. Preacher. No, sir, nor no disrespect. They just saw a chance to have a little bit of fun, and, well, sir, you know how it is with boys."

While he was speaking, he held the coat out, and the preacher slipped into it. He joined in the laughter that followed, and joined a family with whom he had been invited to take dinner. He said that the joke was on him, and he guessed he could stand it. He knew the boys were all right and he didn't begrudge them their bit of fun.

TIE-DOWN JOHNNY'S GUNSMOKE TRAIL

PART II

By WILLIAM F. BRAGG

Author of "Gun Law At Death Crossing," etc.

TIE-DOWN JOHNNY'S GUNSMOKE TRAIL

By William F. Bragg

The Story So Far:

TIE-DOWN JOHNNY LEE, a young Texan, and his old partner,

PANHANDLE BILL JENKS, who was in the Ranger service with Tie-down's father, are now in the business of hunting wild horses and recovering strays. But, along with this work, Tie-down is searching grimly for

LIMPING DICK, an outlaw who killed his father, a Ranger captain, during the course of a train robbery years before. Many hundreds of unsigned bank notes were stolen at the time, and they are still turning up—clues for Tie-down to follow.

Tie-down rescues Panhandle from a rancher named

DAN DROGAN, who has accused Panhandle of being a horse thief. After this encounter, Tie-down and Panhandle go on through the night until a storm begins. They see a lighted shack ahead and decide to ask for shelter. At the door of the shack, however, they are attacked by a big, red-bearded man. Panhandle is wounded and Tie-down is knocked out.

When he comes to he raids the shack and drives out the red-bearded giant, so that the wounded Panhandle can have a warm place to stay.

Inside, he finds a partner of the red-bearded man, a young fellow named Spunky, also wounded.

Tie-down looks through Spunky's clothing and finds one of the unsigned bank notes with a message written on it. It is marked with an X and gives notice of an intended holdup at the Wolf Creek trestle the next day of a pay train carrying fifty thousand dollars in gold.

The bandits succeed in capturing Tie-down's partner and horse.

Alone, Tie-down gets to Wolf Creek trestle too late to stop the train robbery. He fights off the gang, however, and saves the life of an express messenger, Joe Forgan.

But one of the masked train robbers has used Tie-down's white horse, and Dan Drogan is on the robbed train. He instantly accused Tie-down of being in with the bandits. Passengers turn on Tie-down. He is overpowered. The bank note with the message on it is found in his pocket.

"That cinches it," shouts Dan Drogan. "We'll throw this kid in the Sun Dog jail and keep him there until he talks turkey. He'll lead us to the gang or get lynched."

CHAPTER V.

THE BATTLE ROYAL.

A VARIED group of excited railroaders, passengers, and others interested in the holdup questioned Tie-down during the short run across the shallow river into Sun Dog City on the west bank. He sat in Joe Forgan's chair in the end of the express car and, whenever possible, defended himself from charges hurled mainly by Dollar Dan Drogan.

Joe Forgan, the nervy express messenger, who had almost lost his life when the gang blew open his car, stood up for Tie-down, swearing that but for Tie-down's appearance, the bearded leader would have shot him in his tracks.

"No bandit," Joe said, scowling at Dollar Dan, "would do that. Why then do you charge this here Johnny Lee with being a member of the gang?"

Drogan rasped: "We found that bank note in his pocket—signed by this here X, and givin' plans for the holdup. How did it come there?"

Tie-down lunged from his chair, angry to the core.

"I've already told you about that fight up in the gulch," he said.

"And how I lost my partner and hoss."

"But it's just yore word that the fight happened," sneered Dollar Dan. "Anyway—who'd ever believe a fool story about a green X shinin' like a headlight in the dark? Or these here big sandstone toadstools?"

"If I was a bandit," snapped Tie-down, "I shore wouldn't jump in and try to save Joe's life. I'd be a fool to do that."

Drogan grinned, green eyes glittering under his shaggy black brows. He stood above Tie-down, big hands planted on his hips, pearl-handled gun sagging from his belt.

"Mebbe not such a fool," he jeered. "Mebbe you're the inside man for this gang—the spy. By apparently savin' Joe's life, you win a way into the confidence of these here railroaders. Then—when you hear of money shipments—you can pass the word on to yore pals by means of these unsigned notes. Pals like yore friend, Oregon Jake Bowen, who hates the railroad because of his trouble with it over land."

The son of the late Ranger captain, though he was unarmed and facing a dozen stern-faced men who had just emerged from the terrors of a train stick-up, would not sit by and listen to insults.

Before guards could halt him, Tie-down lunged from his chair. He reached Dollar Dan Drogan as the latter reeled backward, cursing, and reaching for his gun.

"Spy?" rasped Tie-down, gray eyes blazing. "You black-muzzled liar! I saved yore dirty life this mornin'. But now you stand there an' call me a spy, a thief, and a would-be killer. I'll choke you down until you holler you'll eat them words—"

His fingers, toughened by long years of handling rope and reins, sank deeply into Dollar Dan's thick neck. Shouting men sought to interfere as Tie-down rushed his struggling, gasping opponent the full length of the swaying express car.

A passenger bawled. "Kill that mustanger afore he murders Dan!" And, as he shouted, the man flashed a gun and threw down on Tie-down.

But as the front sight lined on a spot between Tie-down's shoulder blades, Joe Forgan grabbed his sawed-off shotgun.

"Hold that bullet!" he shouted.

Lunging against the braced body of the gunman, he slapped the man's arm with the barrels of his own gun, knocked down the big Colt before it could drive a slug into Tie-down's struggling body.

Joe's quick action in defense of the man who had saved his life, brought on a general row between passengers who favored Dan Drogan, and the conductor and brakeman, who had stood with Joe facing the outlaw weapons when Tie-down appeared.

The angry passenger's exploding Colt drove its lead into the car floor as Joe's gun barrel jarred the man's arm.

The next instant the angry fellow swung on Joe, attempting to pistol-whip the brave express messenger. Joe, with a hearty Irish shout, immediately ducked under the skull-popping blow, dropping his right hand away from his shotgun. Then, in true Irish fashion, he balled a fist and shot a rocking punch to the point of the angry passenger's chin.

The man went down like a shot. Stepping over the limp form, Joe rushed into a battle royal being waged in the corner of the car beside the looted safe by the conductor and brakeman against three of Drogan's friends.

Racks designed to hold express parcels crashed down as swaying bodies struck them. The stout conductor flew from the fight like a bullet as a heavy fist landed a hard blow below his right eye. He struck the safe, bounced back into the battle with a yell like a prize-fighter coming off the ropes of the ring.

Meanwhile in the far end of the car, Tie-down Johnny, clinging closely to Dollar Dan's lithely built body because of the latter's cleared gun, heard only the sounds of the fight started by Joe. He dared not turn his head to view the roaring, crashing conflict.

For when he tackled Dollar Dan, he immediately discovered that the Sun Dog stockman outweighed him by several pounds, was fully as tall, and was a strong and resourceful fighter.

But the insult of being called a spy and a thief so burned the heart of the young horseman—the heart saddened this moment, too, by the loss of his partner and his pet horse —that Tie-down fought to make Drogan recall his hateful charges.

He burrowed his head against Drogan's heaving chest, flung his left arm around the other's right to prevent Drogan using his gun. He used his own right to cling to the cattleman's lurching, writhing form.

He felt the hot breath of Dollar Dan on his forehead, heard Drogan's gasped-out curses as the latter strove to free the imprisoned right arm and bring the gun into play.

Tie-down knew that if Drogan but touched the muzzle of the pearl-handled gun to his body, roaring death would certainly follow. He had not counted on that when he leaped on Drogan to avenge an insult. And he told himself that if he had thought of death, fear would not have held him silent nor motionless.

"You lyin', bald-faced killer," Drogan rasped, pounding at Tie-down's ribs with his left fist. "I'll batter yuh to red ribbons!"

Tie-down, fighting for life and victory, said never a word. He tightened his left arm, dug with the curling fingers of his right hand that sank deeper each moment into the flesh of Drogan's throat.

The larger man began to gasp and pant like a hard-run horse. As he fought for air to fill his tortured lungs, he found none to waste on threats or curses.

Alarm and fear filled Dollar Dan. He shouted a hoarse appeal.

"Take this wild cat offn me! He . . . he's chokin' me to death!"

But his appeal went unanswered. His three friends were too heavily engaged with Joe Forgan, the fat conductor, and the big shock-haired brakeman.

Then Drogan's back crashed against the forward wall of the car. The shock loosened Tie-down's grip on his gun arm. Drogan, almost senseless from the strangle hold on his throat, beaten, exhausted, pitched up his gun that all this while he had gripped in his right hand.

Tie-down drew back, poised on the balls of his feet, lunged for Drogan's gun arm as the black-browed cattleman flung up the weapon.

The huge weapon bellowed. Its roar shook the walls of the speeding car just now rumbling across the bridge that led into Sun Dog City.

The bullet zipped past Tie-down. He seized Drogan's right wrist with both his hands.

Drogan, fighting and snarling, striving again to drive a bullet, shot his left fist into Tie-down's face. It was a crushing blow. Tie-down's

brain reeled as he felt cruel knuckles rasp all the skin off his tanned cheek.

But he dared not release his hold on his foeman's wrist nor relax efforts to get the man's gun. He took bruising punishment while he ground his strong fingers into the bones of Drogan's wrist.

Crack! Drogan almost broke the left fist he was using as a mallet to batter Tie-down's face.

The Texan's head sagged. The breath whistled between his teeth. His legs shook, and only iron nerve and an invincible will kept him on his feet.

"If I . . . I can't shoot you!" gasped Drogan, green eyes wide and staring now, "I . . . I'll beat you to death!"

He slammed a third crackling blow that closed Tie-down's left eye. If he could have reached the Texan's chin, then perhaps he would have knocked his man senseless. But Tie-down was fighting with wits as well as strength. He held his chin tucked against his body, so far as he was able, and thus warded off blows that would have stretched him out on the floor, an easy prey for Drogan's gun.

"You . . . you stone-faced rannihan!" Dollar Dan panted "Don't yuh *know* when yo're *licked?*"

Between swollen lips, Tie-down spoke for the first time since he had lunged, unarmed, into battle with this man who termed him a bandit and a sneak spy.

"You . . . you can *never* lick me," he muttered.

No—men like Dollar Dan Drogan, never in all the world, even with their might and power, could defeat men of the stamp of Tie-down Johnny Lee. They might beat them to the earth. They would rise again. They might injure them physically, but the Western code of straight riding, shooting, and fair play that Tie-down and his kind followed would never die in the wide country of the mountains and the plains.

Swaying and weakening rapidly, Tie-down mustered his last ounce of strength. He twisted Drogan's wrist until the man cried in torment.

With a thud the pearl-handled gun fell to the floor.

Drogan swooped to retrieve it. But Tie-down dropped to his knees and seized the weapon an instant ahead of the man who had dropped it.

He flung up the barrel, rammed the front sight against Dollar Dan's belt buckle.

"Put up yore hands!" he gasped. "Or—you die in yore tracks!"

Looking down into those indomitable gray eyes, into the mauled but hard-set face, Dollar Dan Drogan knew that here was a man who would never bluff.

Swaying back against the end of the car, Dollar Dan put his hands in the air. He, too, was bruised and breathless. He surrendered.

"You can't get away, though," he told Tie-down. "We're just coming into Sun Dog City. There's hundreds of men waitin' for the pay that's supposed to be on this car. Iron Mike Malloy's huskies, hard-rock men, an' steel gangs. They'll tear yuh to pieces when they find out yuh're part of the X gang."

Tie-down staggered up. He turned and backed to the side wall of the car. Here he could cover Drogan, and, for the first time view the battle at the other end between Drogan's friends and Joe Forgan and his pals.

He saw that in a fair fist fight, Forgan would have led his cohorts to victory. But the conductor and

the brakemen were not armed. The men they opposed had drawn pistols and now the trainmen stood with their hands in the air while bruised and cursing gun hawks threatened them.

Joe lay unconscious on the floor. He had been felled by a glancing blow dealt by a gun stock.

Tie-down shouted hoarsely. "You hombres with the guns! Drop 'em!"

The command startled the gunmen who stood with their backs to the Texan. They turned slowly. And looked into Tie-down's circling Colt barrel. A long instant they stood with the color draining from their battered faces.

As they suspected Tie-down of being an X outlaw, he knew the three gun hawks now expected a quick death from his Colt. They didn't believe he would remain in the car until it reached Sun Dog City, and there face an angry mob of railroad graders stripped of hard-earned pay.

Fearing death the three men meditated a fight for life. For long moments—moments that seemed hours to the young Texan—they measured their chances of living or dying. Their eyes were narrowed, hateful.

Tie-down saw that each waited for another to make the first fighting move. It was a common human quality. Few men care to lead boldly into danger although—once the chief appears—they will follow bravely enough. This saved Tie-down.

The first man's nerve broke. With a muttered curse he dropped his gun and raised his hands in surrender. His two mates followed suit.

Not by a single tremor of his voice did Tie-down betray the relief he felt.

"Pick up the guns," he directed the conductor and the brakeman. "Then dump some water over Joe Forgan. And that other hombre on the floor that Joe busted."

The conductor spat out a tooth, grinned painfully, as he bent over Joe.

"This Joe," he said, "would rather fight than eat."

The brakeman, whose nose now looked as big as a beet from a hard punch recently planted on its bridge, grunted.

"For onct Joe got all the fightin' he wanted."

The trainmen stepped away from the disarmed gun hawks.

Tie-down motioned Dollar Dan over to the group. Then he faced the audience, friendly and hostile. For now a bucket of cold water had restored the senses of Joe, and the express messenger sat limply in his old chair near the safe.

"Boys," Tie-down declared, "Dan thar figgers since I got his gun that I aim to run away. He's locoed. I told you before—and I say it now—I'm innocent of any connection with that gang. For some reason of his own—mebbe because he thinks I'm a hoss thief—Drogan's tryin' to hang somethin' onto me. Waal, I'll face fair-minded men in Sun Dog City. I'll tell my story an' give the law every chance to find out whether I'm a true man or false. I'll offer all the help I can, too, to help run down that X gang. For after all"—his voice broke slightly—"the man I love like a father since my own died with his boots on—this gang has killed Panhandle Bill Jenks—or are holdin' him prisoner. And, until I look on his face again, alive or dead, I'll ride the gun-smoke trail."

As he finished, the engine whistled for clearance. Then the brakes

went on and the express car began slowing to a stop for headquarters in Sun Dog City of the mountain division of the Wyoming and Grand Western.

CHAPTER VI.

HUSKIES' RIOT.

THE arrival of the engine and looted car was the first word to Sun Doggers that a holdup had been successfully staged at the Wolf Creek trestle, and fifty thousand dollars in gold and greenbacks stolen. It stirred the raw frontier town, this last outpost of civilization on the new railroad being thrown west toward the dim blue line of the Rockies.

Within ten minutes the single street of Sun Dog City, a wide and deeply rutted road lined with shacks, tents, log cabins, and even huts built from sheets of galvanized iron, buzzed like an overturned beehive.

From a dozen saloons, gambling houses, cafés, and hotels that sprawled along Hair Trigger Row—as the main street was termed—hundreds of ruddy-faced graders and bridge builders who had come to town to draw their wages and stage a spree, hurried toward the spot where the engine had halted.

The shout of the engineer stirred them to rage as Tie-down dropped from the door of the express car on the heels of his prisoners and the train crew.

"Boys!" yelled the excited engineer, leaning from his cab window, cap pulled all askew. "A bunch got yore pay! Every dang cent of it! Yo're all busted flat until Mike Malloy can bring in more dough! But—Dollar Dan Drogan claims he caught one of the gang. A lanky kid named Johnny Lee—"

Angry eyes swung toward the group of men trudging away from the express car toward the long plank building that housed division headquarters. This stood a hundred yards down the right of way from the box car that served temporarily as the Sun Dog City depot.

An Irishman sighted the gun that Tie-down held. He marked that the weapon was lined on Dollar Dan Drogan. Knowing Drogan as a well-known Sun Dogger, the grader assumed that the bandit suspect had somehow gained a weapon and was seeking some means of escape.

"Bad cess to the thavin' outlaw!" roared the husky. And, spitting on his huge hands, he bore down on Tie-down Johnny.

A crowd of his burly mates—men whose muscles had been hardened to iron and rawhide by years of work putting steel rails across deserts, laying steel bridges over foaming rivers, carving grades from the living granite of canyon walls—a crowd of these beetle-browed warriors followed their red-muzzled leader.

Tie-down heard the thud of heavy boots on the gravel ballast of the right of way. He whirled and saw the grade gang almost upon him. He flung up his gun. He knew these men were honestly mistaken. They were wildly angry because their pay had been stolen and they would not receive more until another pay car could cross a hundred miles of desert between Sun Dog City and the bank where their contractor boss, Iron Mike Malloy, kept his account.

Knowing all this, Tie-down didn't wish to drive killing bullets into the bulging bodies of horny-handed railroaders. But he saw immediately that no man could argue with these fellows. They lunged toward him. If he emptied his gun he might drop

three or four. But the others would reach him, tear the smoking weapon from his hands, rip him to bits, or run him to the nearest telegraph pole and hang him from its cross-arm.

He expected no aid from Dollar Dan and his three friends. Nor did he receive aid. They promptly shouted to the oncoming mob that Tie-down had stolen the gun, that if he wasn't captured he might escape.

"We'll take that gun!" bellowed the Irish leader. "We'll take it from the brazen-faced young spalpeen!"

One of the man's mates, following closely at his friend's heels, bent swiftly. He picked up a huge cinder. He flung it as he rushed at Tie-down. When Tie-down endeavored to duck the jagged missile, the gang closed in on him.

But aid came to him from Joe Forgan, the conductor, and the brakeman. The stout-hearted trainmen, who had declared for Tie-down because he had saved Joe's life, slugged their way into the heaving, twisting knot of men that surrounded Tie-down. As they came, they slashed with their gun barrels and cracked many hard skulls.

Drogan and his friends, not caring to step into this heated, dangerous fight, lingered on the flanks, shouting encouragement to the graders, bidding them lynch the bold young bandit who had dared to aid a gang steal a month's pay roll.

And, furiously angry at the thought of the splendid spree they would miss this night, the graders strove to tear Tie-down limb from limb. Their very enthusiasm to close with him aided the Texas fighter. The Irishmen interfered with one another. In their excitement one friend often landed a blow on another mate's nose instead of on Tie-down's suffering face.

But they had almost knocked him to his knees before Forgan and the two trainmen fought to his side. Then the four stood in a tight little knot. They faced outward and they fought for their lives.

The alarm spread throughout Sun Dog City. Cowboys hustled out to hitch racks and sprang into their saddles. Citizens pulled shut the front doors of stores and came running, bearing rifles, shotguns, six-guns, and any manner of weapon they could find quickly.

But from the plank shack that served as division headquarters came the man who prevented Tie-down and his friends from being battered into subjection, and, likely enough, lynched soon after.

Tie-down heard a bull-like bellowing above the roar of the mob that clawed at his body. It was a brazen voice and he saw the graders retreat from him at its sound.

"Stand back, you terriers!" the great voice boomed. "Is it that you're yellow dogs to so mistrate wan lone man? Sure as me name's Iron Mike Malloy, I'll tear yore ugly heads from betwane yore shoulders if you don't heed me."

And then a mighty man with a shock of bright red hair on his bullet head and a grim red beard that flashed in the afternoon sunlight like fire, reached the side of weary young Tie-down and his trainmen friends.

Fists, almost the size of hams, flourished under the blunt noses of the red-eyed graders who were striving to knock Tie-down off his legs.

"Stand back!" raged Iron Mike Malloy, king of the high-country graders, boss of the tie men, chief

of the jerk-liners, and all the tough rough crew that laid steel. "Stand back—or I'll be after knockin' *all* yore heads together!"

The grader who led the mob spat out a front tooth. Then he bellowed.

"Mike, that lad yo're protectin' so civillike, sure and he stole all the gold from the train. Yore gold, Mike, what you was to pay off good men with!"

Smack! Iron Mike's huge fist crashed against the grader's chin. He rolled up his eyes and fell back into the arms of his friends.

"Sure an' is any wan of yuh wantin' the taste of my hand?" bellowed Iron Mike, rolling his Irish-blue eyes in his wind-burned, blocky face. "Sure an' it's plazed I'll be to serve it to thim!"

They gave away, sullenly. But they cursed and shook their heads as they retreated. They carried senseless friends with them as they trudged up Hair Trigger Row.

"Good bhoys," growled Iron Mike, blowing on his hot knuckles. "But pore men whin it comes to handlin' their fives. Now the darlints are experts at knockin' in heads with pick handles. 'Tis lucky you lads are," he said, grinning on Tie-down and his friends, "that they had not tools nearby when they jumped you."

Joe Forgan narrowed his eyes and spoke from one corner of his rapidly swelling mouth.

"This boy here—this Johnny Lee—he's not a thief like Drogan over there is callin' him. The lad saved my life an hour back, Mike. But, because of some silly evidence, this black broth of a Drogan is callin' him a murderin' thafe."

"Come into headquarters where we can talk," growled Iron Mike. "The superintendent's there. He'll be wantin' to hear—to put posses out—to block the mountains and the deserts where these outlaws might ride."

In the room that served as private office for lean, grim-faced John Kennard, boss of the mountain division, Tie-down again faced his accuser, Dollar Dan Drogan—while railroaders like Kennard, Iron Mike, and the train crew, listened and weighed the evidence.

Meanwhile, busy telegraphers bent over their brass keys, pounding out word along the whispering wires that the X gang had struck at the Wolf Creek Trestle. Agents in lonely desert stations listened, then scurried with that warning to grim and dusty horsemen who forthwith departed at the gallop to block this pass or that, guard some creek crossing, throw scouts out to watch some waterhole where outlaws might stop to rest their jaded mounts.

And while Tie-down and Drogan denied and accused, riders armed themselves and swung on the high run out of Sun Dog City. Some galloped to take up the hot trail from the trestle. Others rushed to search the ferry station of Oregon Jake Bowen.

Tie-down, standing tensely in the midst of a circle of grim men who listened and weighed the evidence he was presenting, heard the shriek of a locomotive whistle as a fast train tore past, hurrying toward the trestle to extinguish the fire, repair the line, bring in the coaches and the load of excited passengers.

The Texan reflected that, though this boom town, like most of its type, was born in excitement and thrived on it, yet never before had it undergone such a wave of wild feeling.

"It isn't every day that fifty

thousand dollars is stolen off our trains," drawled lean John Kennard, boss of the division.

The veteran railroader spoke icily. The iron-rimmed spectacles he wore far down on his long thin nose glittered, too, with a frosty light. This Kennard had been hardened by years of railroad work, fighting the hazards of mountains where his steel rails were strung. His underlings said Kennard was stern but just. He would fight to the death for railroad rights.

On Kennard's table top lay the bank note that had been found in Tie-down's pocket. There, too, as proof of lawful intention Tie-down had laid Dan Drogan's gun. And the conductor and brakeman, at Kennard's order, had also planted there the weapons previously taken from Drogan's friends.

"Your story," Kennard went on, narrowly inspecting the bruised face of Tie-down, "would seem foolish—if we hadn't proof from Joe Forgan here that you saved his life, and risked your own to do it. That yarn about a fight in the dark with a red-bearded giant—"

At those revealing words, every eye in the room turned toward Iron Mike Malloy's red beard. The king of the mountain graders knotted his fists and boomed out.

"No, bedad, I wouldn't be after stalin' my own money!"

Dollar Dan Drogan cut in fiercely. "Nor would I. I needed that cash to buy some land here in town I got an option on."

Malloy narrowed his grim blue eyes and glared at Drogan.

"The land," he snarled, "that has caused all my trouble with Oregon Jake Bowen!"

"What do you mean by that?" rasped Drogan.

"'Tis well you know what I mane," roared Mike. "Sure an' you got advance word of where the new line would run. Part of it twisted across the pore old man's land. You knew well enough the value would go up. So you took advantage of the ould feller's ignorance. You got an option from him on that land—at a dirt chape price. And, by closin' that option you can turn around and resell the land to us at a big figure."

Drogan scowled. "Malloy—what I did was business."

"Not *good* business, you black thafe. Because you so deluded the ould man—this Oregon Jake—that he thinks some of us railroad lads is in with you to stale his acres. And if he has fergot what he owes to the pretty colleen his daughter, and jumped into this train holdup, then it's you, Dollar Dan!" Mike's brassy voice rang until the roof rattled. "It's *you* that druv the ould man to destruction an' put tears into that girl's eyes."

Drogan bent swiftly, seized the gun from the table. He attempted to throw it toward the mighty breast of Mike Malloy and drive a bullet into that brave Irish heart.

But Tie-down Johnny, amazed at this revealing talk between the two men, reached out in the nick of time. He seized the Colt barrel. He forced it downward as Drogan pulled the trigger. The slug intended for Mike ripped a furrow across the top of Kennard's table.

Then men closed on Drogan and wrested away his weapon. He was hurled bodily from the station while other men struggled to prevent Iron Mike from choking the man to death.

"The foul killer!" raged Mike. Then his blue eyes softened and he looked at Tie-down Johnny. "Lad," he went on, "you have just save an-

other Irishman's life this day. Be-dad, the world may not be well off for too many Irish in it. But here's two that are glad to be alive, thanks to the likes of you—mesilf an' Joe Forgan."

Kennard interrupted him coldly. "Mike," he drawled, "by jumping into Drogan you have broken up our investigation. Drogan's gone uptown. Doubtless he'll stir up a mob, for he has plenty of money to spend on fightin' whiskey. I'd like it if cool-headed men will size up this situation. Will you go up and try to soothe down yore sand hogs? Meanwhile—if this boy doesn't object—we'll lock him away safe until we reach a decision as to his guilt or innocence."

Malloy grumbled but he obeyed. He followed Drogan uptown to break up any mob the Dollar Sign stockman might organize.

Then Kennard looked at Tie-down and awaited his answer. The lean young Texan hated to be locked up, but he had sworn he would aid the law. He knew the railroaders would discuss plans for capturing the outlaw gang that they wished to keep secret. As a suspect he could not expect to sit in on the council.

"It won't be jail," said Kennard. "We have a box car on the track outside. We'll put in blankets and a feed of hot grub. You can eat and rest while we're talking. We'll padlock the doors—but not so much to hold you prisoner as to keep a mob out."

Tie-down hated the thought of being locked up. But he said stiffly.

"I offered to help all I could to hunt down this X gang. Don't forget, Mr. Kennard, that my best friend, Panhandle Bill, was lost in this shuffle—and my white hoss, Cloudy."

Kennard tightened his thin lips.

"We are not forgetting," he said softly. "It may also interest you to know that headquarters in Omaha has authorized me to offer a reward of ten thousand dollars, for the taking of any members, or members, dead or alive, of that mysterious X gang."

CHAPTER VII.

OREGON JAKE ARRESTED.

HOURS later Tie-down stirred in the bed of blankets he had made on the car floor. The rest and the sleep had relaxed his lean frame, wearied from a long stretch of riding and fighting. Good food and coffee had filled and warmed his stomach.

But now the sound of a woman's weeping and the glare of a lantern dazzled him. They recalled to his sleep-blurred mind that he was more or less a prisoner and suspected by some men of being a spy for a murderous gang.

Sitting up in his bed at the end of the box car, he saw that the door had been opened. Men had entered with lanterns. By the glare of light he marked the glittering glasses of John Kennard. He saw a gleam of soft red from the curls of Polly Ann Bowen.

There stood the daughter of Oregon Jake. She wept as she clung to the arm of a lean, gray-bearded man who wore dingy buckskins, flat-heeled cowhide boots, and a cartridge belt from which hung an empty holster.

"You can't arrest my father!" cried Polly Ann. "He's not an outlaw! It's just another move of your thieving railroad to run us off this river because we own land you need for development."

In a hoarse voice, Oregon Jake declared that his daughter spoke the truth.

Kennard answered calmly, waving a sheaf of greenbacks under Oregon Jake's sunburned eagle beak of a nose.

"If you weren't in with the gang," he asked, "how does it come that my men in searching your place found these unsigned bank notes hidden under a pile of hay in your barn loft? Bills similar to the one the boss of the gang signed with an X, and which was found—as I told you before—in young Lee's pocket."

Polly Ann flung herself indignantly toward Kennard.

"Lee!" she flamed. "So you found one of those bank notes in his pocket? I see it all now. He protected me this morning from Dan Drogan. But that was all a play to quiet my suspicions. He was part of the gang. He was in the stable. He hid those notes there to throw suspicion on my father."

At that charge, Tie-down leaped from his blankets. He failed to remember that he didn't look like the same clear-eyed youth who that morning had saved Polly Ann from Drogan's brutal treatment.

The girl screamed as he emerged from the shadows at the end of the car. She fell back into her father's arms. For she saw a face swollen and bruised, a left eye that had turned black and blue and now was covered with a bandage containing a chunk of raw steak, and sundry scratches and claw marks also put on Tie-down's tanned features by the fists and fingers of angry graders.

"You're beside yourself with fear," Tie-down said, and he attempted to speak calmly. "You know—if you'll stop to think—that I would never frame you or your father."

"You," she faltered, "are you—with that face—are you this Tie-down Johnny Lee? Why—this morning—you were—" Even in the dim glow of the lantern he marked the rich red that suddenly mantled her cheeks as she continued: "You were so—good-lookin'."

It was Tie-down's turn to blush. For it wasn't often that a pretty girl had informed him he was good-looking. Suddenly he remembered that he must present a horrifying spectacle with his battered countenance, his hair in wild disarray, his ripped and disheveled clothing.

"I . . . I'm Johnny Lee," he stammered. "And I . . . I'm here to offer what help I can in trappin' this X gang. All I ask of you, Miss Bowen, is this. Don't add to my troubles by makin' wild charges. All you got against me is this. A bank note was found in my pocket. Similar notes were—from what Kennard says—found in your barn. I was in that barn this mornin'. But, so were you—and Drogan—and probably members of the gang that stole hosses from yore father. And now—"

Old Oregon Jake stepped away from his daughter just then and, as he lurched between Tie-down and the glare of the lantern held high by Kennard, the young Texan's gray eyes narrowed.

For Oregon Jake limped with his right foot. And that, Tie-down recalled, had been the distinguishing mark of the bandit who had killed his father down in Texas, ten years before.

"*You*," Tie-down said harshly, "*you* tell me yore *right* name. And how you hurt yore right leg."

Bowen hunched his shoulders,

pawing the huge gray beard that sprouted from his chin.

"You," he rasped in turn, "you tell me whut business that is of yores?"

"Were you ever in Texas?"

"Shore I was in Texas—and most every other section of the West. I'm sixty years old an' I've lived west of the Mississippi all my life. Why yuh questionin' me?"

"I heard you came from Texas. So did I—from the Staked Plains country. Did you ever hear of a man called Captain Jack Lee?"

A tremor shook Bowen's gangling frame. His hand, horny from years of toil, from grasping the sweep and the cables of a ferryboat, fell away from his beard. And Tie-down, grimly awaiting an answer, saw that the man's fingers shook.

"Captain Jack Lee—" Oregon Jake's voice quivered. "I . . . I *never* heard of him."

But he couldn't hide the shock that the question had caused. Tie-down snarled. "*You lie.* You *have* heard of Captain Lee. You know that he was killed by Limpin' Dick in a train holdup—a robbery where Dick got away with unsigned bank notes like those Kennard is holdin' in his hand!"

Oregon Jake groaned. "I swear I wasn't concerned in the death of Captain Lee, nor the robbery of that train. I swear that I didn't hide these notes in my barn loft."

"Why do you limp?" thundered Tie-down.

Polly Ann sprang vigorously to her suffering father's aid. Boldly she faced Tie-down. Her blue eyes blazed.

"Are you charging," she cried, "that my poor dad was once known as Limping Dick? That he killed a Ranger captain when these unsigned notes were stolen?"

Tie-down snapped, "I have made no charges. I have asked questions. I think your father shows by his actions that he knows more than he will tell about that Limpin' Dick raid." He narrowed his eyes and stepped nearer the girl. "Mebbe *you* can tell," he went on, "why yore father limps."

She faltered, all her rage suddenly fading. "He . . . he told me once he was thrown off a hoss and broke his ankle, that it knitted wrong, and that ever since he's been sort of rubber-footed."

Old Jake broke in, almost imploringly, his red-rimmed eyes on Tie-down's stern young face.

"That's the gospel truth," he pleaded. "I was throwed off a hoss years before I met the gal up in Oregon who become the maw of my little Polly Ann. The gal who left us both, some years ago, to head fer a brighter land than this rowdy old West."

That remark recalled to Tie-down that he, too, had a mother in Texas, a gray-haired woman he loved, one who for years had sadly missed the absence from her side of her husband and lover, Captain Jack Lee. And Tie-down's hot young eyes suddenly lost their fierce look and he said awkwardly to the weeping girl and her dejected father:

"Mebbe . . . mebbe I talked too fast, folks. But—Captain Lee was my dad. I . . . I would give my heart and soul to find the man who killed him. That skunk known as Limpin' Dick."

Polly Ann Bowen looked at him with wet eyes. "I'm sorry," she said softly, "that I accused you of planting the money in our barn. But—like you—I was fighting for my dad against this gang of pirates!" Her temper flashed sparks

again and she swung on Kennard and his men.

Kennard said hastily: "Miss Bowen—we're not pirates. We don't want to steal your land. But we can't buy it so long as Drogan holds that option."

Oregon Jake cut in hoarsely. "You hired Drogan, as your agent, to *get* that option. How would he know where you would lay your rails if *you* didn't tell him? You thieves—I've put my case into the courts! And if you try to jump my land, I'll kill every man who shows up on the job!"

Kennard said grimly: "First, you'd better clear yourself of this charge of being in on the Wolf Creek stick-up."

"You've got no real evidence against me," growled Oregon Jake.

"These notes were found in yore barn."

"Who found 'em?"

"One of the posses was led by Dan Drogan."

Oregon Jake roared angrily. "Drogan again. *Your tool!* He could have planted them. Mebbe *he's* in on the holdup."

"He lost ten thousand dollars in it," Kennard retorted. "And you know it was a straight loss since this wasn't a regular insured express shipment. The money was being sent at owners' risk. We all—the railroad, Mike Malloy, and Drogan—lost money. If you're intimating that Drogan might have planted these notes in the hay, I'll tell you this—some men I trust found it. Some of my special agents."

Now Tie-down interrupted. "Kennard—just the same, an enemy of Bowen's might have hidden this money, knowing your men would search his place."

"I don't deny that," Kennard growled. "All I'm saying is that Jake hates the railroad. He had a motive to rob our train. Suspicious evidence was found. He must forget his animosity against us, and help us clear things up."

Tie-down considered that a fair statement.

Then Kennard briefly explained that Jake had been found in the desert miles south of the railroad, afoot, and half dead from thirst. He had sworn bitterly that the gang had held him prisoner, used his horses for the first relay jump after the robbery, and finally released him. But he hadn't recognized any of the gang because all wore masks while they were with him.

"One had a red beard," Oregon Jake cut in at this point in Kennard's talk. "Another wore a bandage around his head. And there was just one old man who wasn't masked. He smoked a pipe—"

Tie-down shouted. "My pard! Panhandle Bill Jenks! He's alive!" Filled with joy, he leaped forward and flung his arms around the astonished old ferryboat captain.

Oregon Jake snarled as he broke loose. "Dang yuh—if yuh want to hug somebody—hug my daughter!"

"By gosh!" vowed Tie-down. "I'd dang near do that—if she'd stand fer it. Jake—you've taken loads offn my mind since you let me know Panhandle's still in the land o' the livin'. That X gang—well, we'll soon be hot on their trail."

Kennard interrupted. "We'll let you three talk things over awhile. It's mighty late. I don't think we'll hold you much past mornin'. The evidence is slim against you both."

Polly Ann blazed. "You mean you'll hold my dad a prisoner?"

"Not a prisoner," Kennard apologized. "But the bunch uptown is

right restless. If he was foot-loose —or this Tie-down lad—some of the railroad huskies might lynch 'em."

Kennard and his aids dropped from the box-car door. Tie-down believed Polly Ann would remain with her father. But at the last moment she planted a hasty kiss on Jake's sunburned cheek, and also departed. She declared she would go uptown and get a hot meal for the prisoners.

Tie-down heard the rasp of a padlock outside as Kennard and his men locked the box-car door. Then could be heard the tramp of boots as a guard started pacing back and forth. He was confined with Oregon Jake. He was suspected with this limping man of having helped plot the holdup.

With cold despair gripping his heart, Tie-down faced the bearded frontiersman by the guttering light of the lantern.

"You lied to me," he said, "about not knowing anything of my dad's death down in Texas—and Limpin' Dick."

Oregon Jake shook his head miserably. "If I lied," he whispered, "I lied because I . . . I was afraid. Not for myself, but—afraid for Polly Ann. The little gal I love above anything else in this world."

"What are you afraid of?"

Jake looked fearfully into the shadowy corners of the car before he stepped over to Tie-down and whispered:

"I . . . I got one of those unsigned bank notes with an X on it. It warned me that if I ever told what I knew about Captain Lee's death—my little girl would suffer."

As they faced each other, a sudden choked cry sounded just outside the car, followed by a dull pounding against the door.

Tie-down sprang away from Jake. "They've knocked out the guard!" he snapped. "Drogan's raised a mob! They're tryin' to break in!" He looked wildly about for a weapon. There wasn't so much as a stick of wood in the car.

Oregon Jake laughed, reached for the lantern, blew it out. Tie-down heard his hoarse reply in the darkness.

"It's my daughter come back to let us out. That's why she went uptown. To find friends. It's them outside."

Tie-down snarled. "But Jake—if we run away—that'll almost convince these railroaders we were in on the holdup."

"Yuh want to find yore pardner, don't yuh? Shucks—I don't keer *what* this danged railroad gang thinks. I aim to git away soon as Polly Ann and her friends bust open the door."

At that moment the door rolled to the side on its iron runway. Tie-down and Oregon Jake crouched in the middle of the car, waiting. The Texan was filled with worry over this sudden move. Oregon Jake was openly jubilant. It was clear that he hated the railroad gang, believing they had lured him into selling land too cheaply.

Then Tie-down Johnny saw something that shocked him. In the blackness near the doorway appeared the green light shaped like an X—the same sort of ghostly radiance he had seen for the first time in the fight up in the gulch where Panhandle had been lost.

With a hoarse cry he sprang toward the doorway. He would grasp that green fire, discover the secret. Men crowded suddenly through the doorway as he lunged toward it. He was knocked off balance. A gun

slammed down savagely on the point of his right shoulder as he balled his fist and swung a sharp uppercut.

As he went down, he heard the shout of Oregon Jake.

"Polly Ann! Where be yuh?"

The answer came in a hoarse laugh.

"This ain't Polly Ann. We're the *X gang*. And we're takin' you two outta here—fer reasons of our own."

Two men held the struggling Tie-down. But he saw a light gleam briefly. By its glare he marked that his captors all wore grain sacks as masks pulled over their heads.

A lean man *limped* toward the wall of the car.

Holding high a lantern, the bandit scrawled with a bit of chalk.

"The X gang takes back its own."

CHAPTER VIII.

CATTLE THIEVES STRIKE.

TIE-DOWN JOHNNY had departed from towns, horseback and afoot. But never had he ridden through a black night lying flat on the roof of a lurching swaying stock car. For there the X outlaws stowed their two prisoners to escape from Sun Dog City.

Two men remained on the roof of the car to guard Tie-down and Oregon Jake. The third man—the man who limped—had disappeared after the captives had been removed hurriedly from their temporary jail.

One of the guards proved chatty. The grain-sack mask muffled his voice, but he talked on as though he knew Tie-down and Oregon Jake.

"You're both in so dutch with the railroad," he explained, "so when this play come up to steal a bunch of cattle, we figured you'd be proper goats to charge with the rustlin'. That's why the chief writ that message on the wall afore we left—that the gang protects its own—"

Tie-down gasped. "How can you steal cattle by ridin' on a stock train?"

The outlaw laughed. "Word come over the wire early tonight that twenty cars of fat cattle would pass through, goin' west, at around midnight. Well, the cattle are below us. Twenty-five head to a car an' all fat stuff—a beef issue bein' sent by the government to the Sun Dog Injuns. The war whoops won't eat their meat tomorrow."

"Why not?"

The outlaw chuckled. "You wait and see."

His comrade growled. "They may not be *alive* to see."

This remark convinced Tie-down that, after the robbery of the cattle train—the outlaws would kill Oregon Jake and himself, hide their bodies perhaps in some creek or box canyon. The guilt of plotting the beef issue raid would be effectually pinned on men who never again would ride the range.

The thought stirred Tie-down to heedless anger. The outlaws hadn't tied up the Texan nor Oregon Jake. Both guards were strong men, and well armed.

Tie-down determined that he would escape his guards, clear his record by defeating the plan to stop and rob the cattle train.

But how could he accomplish this? He sprawled on the narrow runway atop the swaying car. Far ahead he saw red sparks shooting from the stack of the speeding engine as more coal was thrown in the firebox for the heavy grades that led up new track toward the Rocky Mountains.

Tie-down assumed that the out-

Tie-down clubbed with the rifle, slashing the outlaw over the head before the man could aim his six-gun.

laws had by this time captured the train crew. Just how they would unload the cattle after stopping the train he didn't know.

One guard crouched a few feet from Tie-down. He held a rifle across his lap. His hand was on the hammer. One move from Tie-down and a bullet would tear into the Texan's lean frame.

Tie-down saw that Oregon Jake was held under similar control a few steps along the runway toward the front of the train.

The car Tie-down rode on was coupled to the caboose, the vehicle customarily occupied by trainmen and stockmen, and always the last car on a long stock train.

On the roof of the caboose was a glassed-in cupola. Here trainmen could sit while the train was in motion and watch for signals from the front end; or step out on the caboose roof, walk the length of the train, and set brakes or perform any other duty.

A dull light gleamed in the cupola. It beckoned to Tie-down as a ray of hope. If he could get away from his guard, race along the caboose roof, dive into the cupola, he could at least gain breathing space to plot his next move.

But he must act with the muzzle of a rifle only a few feet from where he sat, lined on his body.

As his mind ran over the next move—which must be a daring one—an incident aided him. The outlaw, no more of a trainman than Tie-down, grunted and weaved back and forth as the engine raced around a sharp curve.

This was new track, recently laid by Iron Mike's gang, and therefore soft. The wheels bumped and rattled. Every curve convinced amateurs like Tie-down and the outlaw that the train was jumping the track.

The outlaw reeled forward. So did Tie-down. But he saw—for his eyes were on the guard—that the rifle barrel had twisted out of line.

Before the guard could get the drop on Tie-down, the Texan flung his lank body to the side. He grasped the rifle barrel with both hands, jerked it away from the outlaw.

Crash! The guard pulled the trigger. The weapon roared, and the bullet whined past Tie-down's head.

He leaped to his feet, grasping the gun by its hot barrel. There was no time to reverse the weapon, throw a shell into the chamber, and kill the guard.

The guard, still on his knees, holding with his left hand to the narrow runway to prevent his body from rolling off the car's sloping roof, jerked a six-gun with his right.

Tie-down clubbed the rifle. He slashed the outlaw over the head with the stock before the man could pitch up his cleared six-gun.

The Colt boomed. But, as it crashed its bullet, the huge weapon fell from the guard's hand. He lost his grip on the runway. The blow from the rifle stock had knocked him senseless. Rolling slowly down the roof, he dropped, without a sound, off the speeding train.

Tie-down almost followed over the edge of the roof. He saw the Colt six-gun sliding along the boards where the outlaw had dropped it. Springing to recover the weapon, he stumbled, for high-heeled boots were never designed as footgear for the slippery tops of railroad cars.

The man who had been guarding Oregon Jake leaped to his feet. He stood with legs braced against the lurch of the stock car. The rising

moon over the Rocky Mountain foothills outlined his body.

He fired on Tie-down, struggling not only to retrieve the six-gun, but also to prevent himself from sliding to death over the side of the stock car.

The dim light alone saved Tie-down. A bullet burned into the boards of the car roof below his face. Splinters, curling up, flew into his eyes.

He felt himself sliding and dug in his boot heels. Now his right hand grasped the stock of the six-gun. But, if he attempted to raise up and defend himself, he would surely roll off the car, be ground to death perhaps by iron wheels biting into the new steel rails so recently laid by Malloy's huskies.

Then—from the corner of his eye—Tie-down saw a brave act performed by a man who but a few moments before had confessed himself fearful of this X gang.

Oregon Jake arose on his shaky old legs. Probably in all his life, Oregon Jake had never ridden the heaving roof of a train. But he risked life and limb to save Tie-down Johnny.

Boldly he sacrificed foot and balance. He bowed his shaggy head, lunged forward. He struck the gun hawk on the runway, just back of the knees.

The man lurched forward, tripped as his boot heels threw him. With a yell he went sliding and rolling, head foremost, over the side of the car.

Tie-down Johnny was stretched out flat now, his legs dangling over the edge. He heard one high, choked yell, and then the dull *clickety-click* of iron wheels tearing along toward the Rocky Mountains.

Oregon Jake, unbalanced by his dive at the gun hawk's legs, came sliding down the sloping roof. He yelled hoarsely for help. All his nerve had vanished. He feared death under the wheels.

"Help!" he choked out. "Help! Oh, gosh—"

His sliding body struck Tie-down's. The two hung there on the edge of the roof. Tie-down had found a crack in one of the boards. He had dug the fingers of his left hand into it. Only that crevice held him. And, since his lean body served as a barrier to prevent Jake from going over the side, his grip on the board also saved the life of the old ferryboat captain.

The night was sharp and cold in this foothill country. But a cold dew stood out on the lean face of Tie-down Johnny. His left arm, under the terrific strain, felt as though it were being pulled from the socket.

He felt the hands of Oregon Jake clawing at his cartridge belt. Jake had grasped the leather with all the determination of a drowning man reaching for a straw. If he went over the roof, he would carry Tie-down with him.

And, if the old man fell to his death, a girl back in Sun Dog City would be left alone in the world to weep. For her old dad had said earlier that Polly Ann was motherless. She would be a waif of the West, her father classed as an outlaw, her property held under control by a wolf like Dollar Dan Drogan.

Tie-down vowed grimly that for the girl he *must* live. He *must* cling to this crack in the roof of the car with all his strength. He must not lose nerve, turn yellow. Many times in his young life he had been called upon to show bravery in a pinch, exert to the utmost all his mental and physical powers.

But in hot corners before, he had

generally been on familiar ground, mounted on a horse, surrounded by range land. He had never before been forced to fight against the power of a huge engine hurtling through the black night, rounding curves so swiftly that the cars it drew jumped and banged and rattled over the rail connections.

But Tie-down, true to the code he followed as an expert roper, hung on. He stuck to the crack in the car roof. He dug in his fingers until the nails wore off and the ends became red and raw. And, as he hung there he felt the drag of old Oregon Jake's weight, the skinny hands that clawed and fumbled at the cartridge belt buckled around his lean middle.

When he thought the last moment had come, that his strength was gone, Tie-down felt beneath him an easing of the boards of the car roof. They no longer quivered to the strain of the forward motion. Metal shrieked in the night.

He heard the loud blast of the engine whistle. It was as though the locomotive were a wild animal howling for assistance. Metal squalled louder now and Tie-down could sniff a burned odor. He knew what had happened. For some reason the engineer had suddenly set the brakes on the speeding train.

Cars banged and clattered as the long train came to a shuddering halt. Now could be heard the frenzied bellowing of the frightened cattle bunched up in the slat-sided cars.

When the car on which he sprawled, came to a quivering rest, Tie-down was almost over the edge. Only his suffering left arm, fingers still hooked in the crack of the roof, held Oregon Jake and himself from a long drop—perhaps to their deaths —in the darkness.

Far ahead a great red light gleamed in the night.

Tie-down, now that the car had halted, released his clutch. He drew Oregon Jake safely up on the roof. The old man had practically fainted, for fear of a headlong fall had sapped his natural bravery.

Tie-down sat up. He grasped the stock of the six-gun with his right hand. All the while, fighting for life, he had not once lost his grip on the gun. The rifle which he had jerked away from his guard, had long since gone over the roof.

Narrowing his gray eyes, baffled because one was swollen and blurred, Tie-down saw that the red glare ahead came from a great fire which had been set near the right of way. He marked in the light, the moving forms of horsemen.

They had touched off the bonfire as the engine rounded a curve. It appeared to be their favorite method of stopping trains. No engineer would dare drive a train through flames. This freight had easily been halted. Once halted, the cab had come under the guns of the waiting outlaws.

That wasn't all Tie-down saw by the light of the huge fire. He groaned as he marked the sleek body of a slimly built horse. The man who sat the saddle was of gigantic stature. His head was covered with a grain-sack mask.

But Tie-down's gaze rested on the horse. It was his white pony, his beloved Cloudy. The leader of the outlaws now sat Cloudy, under the eyes of the engineer and fireman, directing the work of removing five hundred cattle from the freight cars.

And this, Tie-down thought despairingly, would be but another hook-up with the message the outlaw had scrawled in the box car. The appearance of his white horse

would convince already skeptical railroaders like John Kennard that he was heart and soul with the X gang.

He estimated that at least a half dozen riders were grouped around the bonfire. He could see no present plan to defeat their looting of the train.

But, so long as he lived—and was free with a gun in his fist—he could try.

He whispered to Oregon Jake.

"Follow down on this side of the car away from the fire. Mebbe—jest mebbe—we can bust up this rustlin' deal."

Jake groaned. "I . . . I'm no danged railroader. I'm a ferryboat sailor. And—gosh—I got no gun!"

Tie-down said grimly as he started down the iron ladder that led from the roof to the ground: "*I've* got a gun. And I'll get you one—if I live long enough to turn the trick."

His boots touched the gravel of the right of way. He looked up, saw Oregon Jake crawling gingerly down the ladder, and waited a moment in the darkness.

Here in the gloom, away from the glare of the fire, he was not blinded. He saw the western stars now, and the yellow moon hanging over the eastern hills. Good enough light, he decided, for a close-range gun fight.

A door clanged open far ahead. He heard the bawling of cattle, the whoops of men. He knew that the outlaws had broken into the first car behind the engine, and were now running out the nervous longhorns —cattle that had been intended to fill a beef issue for the Sun Dog Indians.

Above the bellowing and the whoops a gun crashed. A man yelled in sharpest agony. Then the yell died off in a long, shuddering cry as the gun smashed a second time.

"They're not only stealin' cattle," Tie-down whispered to Oregon Jake, who now stood beside him, listening. "They've killed a man, mebbe some pore brakie that tried to resist."

He started up the right of way, moving along in the shadows of the cars. The starlight, passing through the slat sides, was reflected off the glistening eyes of frightened and bawling longhorn cattle.

"Wha-what you figure to do?" old Oregon Jake gasped, trotting at Tie-down's hurrying heels on his cowhide boots.

"Git you a gun from them killers," Tie-down vowed grimly. "Then git back my hoss, and my lost pard, Panhandle Bill Jenks—if I live long enough to turn the trick."

Oregon Jake rasped: "Yeah—if you live long enough—"

The smash of a gun cut short his voice. For a man stepped out of the shadows cast by the engine. He fired on Tie-down and Jake before they could drop to the ground.

The bullet burned past Tie-down's right ear. He flung up his six-gun, prepared to battle for his life.

It's a man-size fight thet Tie-down has busted into. His own life an' the lives of three others depend on how it comes out. Don't miss the third part of this big fast-action novel in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly *next week*.

PECOS WILSON

1. After the death of old Badlands Drake, cook for the Wilson trail outfit, Pecos rode into a nearby cow town to look for another pot-wrastler. Not knowing any one in town, he decided that the best way to get one was to advertise.

2. A few minutes later, he stopped in front of the town's general store and, using the butt of his Colt for a hammer, nailed the sign to the front wall. He had already decided to make the Cowboy's Rest Hotel his headquarters.

3. It wasn't long before the sign attracted the attention of Buzz Whitby, owner of the Dobie Dollar Saloon. Buzz had heard of the Lazy W outfit, and he realized that its need for a cook gave him a chance that shouldn't be missed.

4. Striding into the saloon, Buzz noticed Whiskey Simms, one of his paid gun-slingers, standing at the bar. As he stepped through the door that led to his private office, the saloon owner motioned for the tough hombre to follow him in.

HIRES A COOK

5. "Whiskey," said Buzz, staring at his hireling, "yuh've been layin' round here doin' nothin' fer a long time. Now I got a job fer yuh. Go over an' see Wilson at the hotel an' git thet job as cook fer his outfit. Savvy?" Whiskey Simms nodded.

6. Whiskey didn't know just what was on his boss' mind, but he didn't bother to ask. Whatever it was, it would be crooked —and would pay plenty. That was all that interested Whiskey as he walked across the street and entered the Cowboys' Rest.

7. Pecos Wilson was seated in a corner of the small hotel lobby. He waved Whiskey to a chair and listened to what he had to say. He wasn't impressed by Whiskey's appearance, but realized that any cook he picked up wouldn't be much of a man.

8. At any rate, Pecos told him he was hired and to be ready to ride in an hour. Whiskey hurried back to Buzz Whitby's saloon and reported. Buzz grinned and handed Whiskey a small package. "Dope," he muttered, and explained his plans.

9. Whiskey rode out of town with Pecos Wilson. They rode for over an hour across the rolling range country. And then, ahead of them, Whiskey saw the herd. Pecos pointed it out to him and said that the wagons were farther on ahead.

10. Whiskey started his duties at once. He wasn't much of a cook, but the outfit managed to eat. Next day, the drive moved on, northward. Toward evening, Pecos and Cheyenne Peters rode up toward that night's camp site.

11. Some hunch prompted Pecos to ride up silently. He didn't trust Whiskey. Motioning Cheyenne to stay back, he rode into the grove of trees. He saw Whiskey preparing to dump the contents of a bottle into the outfit's grub.

12. *Blam!* Pecos' six-gun roared and flamed. The slug ripped into the ground between Whiskey's booted feet. With an oath of fear, Whiskey leaped high, dropping the bottle. It broke as it struck a rock on the ground.

13. Whiskey talked before he was tied. He said that Buzz planned to raid the herd while the crew was doped. Pecos had all hands make dummy bed rolls. He wanted to trap Señor Whitby in a red-hot gun trap.

14. When all was in readiness, Pecos and the outfit retired to a spot from which they could watch the bedded-down herd. The rustlers wouldn't bother the sleeping camp, he figured. All guns were loaded, and trigger fingers were itching.

15. At last the rustlers appeared. Their figures were outlined against the starlit sky. So silently had they come that the herd was moving by the time the watchers had seen the rustlers. But Pecos gave a low-voiced order to charge and then—

16. Gun thunder blasted the night. The rustlers, taken completely by surprise, were panic-stricken. Their gunfire was wild, unaimed. Soon the Lazy W crew were the victors. A few of the crooks—including Buzz—escaped.

Ranch Raided By Indians

In the spring of 1864, Indians were making many raids on white settlements along the Arkansas River. One morning at daybreak, about three hundred redskins bore down on the ranch of Robert Wright at Spring Bottom. But they got an unexpected reception.

A volley of gunfire thundered from the house from a few cowhands who happened to be there. After one Indian had been killed, and several of the raiders' ponies had been badly wounded, a group of Indians rode up with a white flag. They asked the boys to come out and make talk. They assured the white men that they did not mean to hurt any one. But when they found that they could not persuade any of the men to leave the house, they renewed the attack furiously.

Before the Indians came to the ranch there were sixteen head of good horses in the pasture, besides some fine fat cows and several mules. Only one horse of all these animals was saved from the savages. It was a beautiful colt that had never been ridden, and it was believed that the raiders had not killed it because they were sure of getting it alive and taking it away with them.

But the smart little colt saved its own skin. The attack had been going on for a long time when there came a lull in the action. Mrs. Wright opened the door to see what the Indians were up to, and the colt rushed toward her. She threw the door wide open then and the animal dashed right into the room.

Mrs. Wright slammed the door shut again and put the bar in place. The colt kept perfectly quiet. Arrows came whizzing into the door, but it was strong and the wood was hard, so that they stuck on the outside.

When the commotion died down, one of the men saddled the colt and left for Point of Rocks to tell the news to Mr. Wright, who had gone there the day before to return a mule that he had borrowed to bring supplies to the ranch.

The colt seemed to know what was required of him, for he ran the whole distance, twenty miles, in less than an hour and a half. Wright was saddling his horse to ride to his home when the man and the colt arrived with the news of the raid. He assured his boss, however, that the children and their mother were on the Arkansas River in a canoe, on their way to Point of Rocks, and that Wright's partner, Joe Graham, was with them.

Bob Wright set off without delay. He had with him a dozen volunteers, with extra horses and a wagon. They saw the canoe the next day, and all were taken out and found shelter with friends.

The next day a party went with Wright to his ranch. There they saw dead horses, mules, cows, hogs and chickens, all piled up in the little stockade. The Wrights did not return to Spring Bottom. They built a ranch at Fort Aubrey, where it was more peaceful, although they had occasional skirmishes with hostile Indians.

JOHNNY FORTY-FIVE SHOES A HOSS

By ANDREW A. GRIFFIN

Author of "The Flying X Rides To Showdown," etc.

But every spike he drove was a coffin nail for the victims of thet kill-crazy carnival of whistlin' lead.

JOHNNY FORTY-FIVE SHOES A HOSS

By Andrew A. Griffin

CHAPTER I.

NEWS OF THE SCORPION KID.

THE stairs groaned under the ponderous weight of United States Deputy Marshal George Krumm, and the fat lawman was groaning himself as he ascended them, groaning with mortification and injured pride.

For fear that someone would see him in his embarrassing condition he had taken the back alleys all the way to this little hotel where he and his young pard were staying. Fortunately, it was night; nearly midnight, in fact.

"They can't do this to me!" piped Deputy Krumm in a voice surprisingly high for so beefy a man. "No, siree! They can't do a thing like this to me! Not to Krumm, king o' Uncle Sam's gun fighters, they can't. I'll show 'em!"

Krumm's Colt six-gun was missing and so was his cartridge belt, his coat, vest, and shirt. He wore no hat, and even his boots were gone. He was padding along in his socks, and about the only other articles of clothing that remained to him were his red-flannel underwear—to which his deputy's badge was droopingly pinned—and his pants, which were exceedingly baggy at the knees and seat. In truth, he was a sight to behold.

He stopped at the top of the stairs to get his breath, then padded down the length of the hall and opened the door of a bedroom at the end.

"Johnny! Wake up, Johnny!" the fat deputy groaned. "Somethin' —somethin's happened to me. Light the lamp."

There was the sound of a yawn, and then a sleepy voice answered Krumm in a singsong chant:

"If you've been havin' scary dreams
Come in and with me bide.
But if you've been havin' nightmares—
Please leave yore broncs outside!"

A match was struck, a lamp chimney rattled into place and Johnny's room became lighted by a cheerful yellow glow. Johnny was already sitting on the edge of his bed and drawing on his tall-heeled, pee-wee Coffeyvilles, an impudent little hombre who seemed about half of his lumbering pardner's size, a kid with an infectious grin and a pair of twinkling blue eyes. At the sight of Krumm they went wide.

"Yuh can cut out thet fool po'try," said Krumm heavily as he seated himself in the room's only chair. "This is serious. I've jist met up with a turrible experience. *And they can't do thet to me!*" he cried, his voice suddenly rising. "When they try to make an idjit out o' one o' Uncle Sam's finest—"

By this time, Johnny Forty-five was laughing so hard that he was having difficulty in dressing himself. This didn't add anything to Krumm's good humor.

"'Tell me what happened, George," said Johnny Forty-five, when he finally succeeded in suppressing his mirth. "Who swiped yore duds?"

Krumm heaved a deep sigh and mopped his round, fat face with the sleeve of his red-flannel undershirt.

"A coupla hours ago I thought I'd go out for a drink—not thet I ever drink except fer a cold," he added hastily, "but I felt a bad cough comin' on, so I started fer the saloon 'round the corner, an'—"

"Then what?" grinned Johnny, who had ridden the law-dog trail with Krumm long enough to know him pretty thoroughly.

"I passed th' livery bar on th' way and a bunch o' rough-lookin' men —travelers—was shootin' dice by the light of a coupla lanterns. They looked kinda like suspicious characters, so I flashed my badge and questioned 'em, an' they—well, they give me an invite into their game."

"So yuh lost everything yuh had in a crap game?" Johnny asked. "Yuh mean yuh gambled with dice?"

"Yeh, them square things with dots on 'em," said the fat officer sarcastically. "Mebbe yuh've heard about 'em."

"I've heard enough so I wouldn't roll 'em with strangers," drawled the rhyming deputy. "Yuh lost yore dinero first, o' course?"

"Yes, six dollars," Krumm nodded. "Thet was all I had, bein' as I let you carry our gov'ment expense money."

"And it's a good thing that I do, amigo," Johnny chuckled. "Now we'll have to rustle yuh some new duds, and a new gun. It's a good thing thet yuh didn't lose yore hoss and saddle."

Beads of sweat stood out on the fat deputy's small, close-cropped mustache. He moaned faintly.

"Johnny," he admitted faintly, "them's the first things I did lose after my money went."

Johnny Forty-five's next little ditty brought a crimson flush to the fat deputy's jowls:

> "When you make mistakes, George,
> Yuh do 'em up fine!
> When the brains was dished out
> You were shoved out of line!"

"Yuh don't need to get huffy, Johnny, jist because a hombre runs into a streak of hard luck," said Krumm complainingly.

"But this is more serious," his rhyming pard told him gravely. "We haven't enough to buy yuh a bronc. All we can do is rent yuh a hoss and outfit, and yuh'll have to square up later." He reached for his Stetson and slanted it over one eye. "We'd better see these gamblin' friends of yores. Maybe they'll sell us yore bronc back at a reasonable price, bein' as they got it so easy."

Krumm shook his head despondently. "They already sold it to the livery-stable man, while I was still thar," he moaned. "A hundred and forty dollars."

"That's out, then," Johnny mused. "What did these hombres look like? Are they still in town?"

"I dunno as to thet, but they seemed ready to hit fer the tall grass," grunted Krumm, answering the last question first. "And I dunno much about what they looked like, 'cause I was so busy watchin' the spots on them dice. I got spots before my eyes *yet!*" he wailed. "I never seen so many sevens and 'levens on a pair o' cubes in all my born days—when *they* was throwin' 'em. All I could manage was twos and threes which, they tells me, ain't wuth much. And did they laff! When I lost my hoss, they laffed, and when I lost my duds they laffed fitn to kill! They seemed to think it was smart to cheat one o' Uncle Sam's officers! They'll find out thet

it ain't safe to monkey with Uncle Sam—"

"Yes, I think they will, George," said Johnny, his voice taking on a harder edge. "Was there much money in this game?"

"Fifteen hundred, if thar was a dime," said the fat officer earnestly. "Mebbe thar was more. Most of it was in silver dollars, and nacherly I wanted to win some of it. If the game had been squar—"

"There was a P. O. robbery up the line last week and most of the swag was in cart wheels," Johnny cut in sharply. "These jaspers were good with the dice, were they?"

" 'Specially the hombre with the anker tattooed on the back of his hand," Krumm nodded. "He seemed to be the boss of the bunch, an' every time—"

"An anchor?" Johnny questioned swiftly.

The song-singing deputy had reached for his makings, a habit he had when thinking hard about something. He deftly laced two brown cigarettes, first with his left hand, then with his right. Instead of lighting the quirlies, however, he flipped them absently away. Johnny Forty-five didn't smoke!

"When yuh do thet, Johnny, I git the creeps," complained the fat pard. "It's jist a waste of tobaccer and papers."

"I'd been asleep, and that sort of worked the cobwebs out of my trigger fingers," Johnny grinned. Something still puzzled him. What Krumm had told him rang a bell somewhere in the back of his brain. A man with an achor tattooed on the back of his hand! Mentally he searched pigeonholes, remembering photos and descriptions of wanted men, criminals in the records of the Post Office Department and of the Secret Service. Then something *did* click.

"Are yuh shore that mark was an anchor, George?" he repeated.

"An anker like is on a steamboat," nodded Krumm with a bored sort of worldly wisdom. "Anybody savvies what an anker is. This young gunny had one on the back of the left hand. I could see it every time he throwed a seven—and thet was plenty often," he added mornfully.

Johnny Forty-five fished a pencil stub and a scrap of paper from a pocket of his Levis riding pants. Taking them under the lamp, he hastily sketched the following figure:

"Yuh shore it wasn't something like *that?*" he demanded, thrusting it under Krumm's nose.

"It was exactly like thet," agreed the fat deputy irritably. "It's like I told yuh. Thet's a pitchur of an anker, the thing a boat slings out when it wants to whoa up. It's an anker!"

Johnny snapped up the folded gun belts from beneath his pillow, buckling them on with a speed born of long practice and tying down the holsters with buckskin thongs. From each oiled scabbard protruded the butt of a Colt .45 single-action, and each slanted loop of the crossed leather belts glinted with lead and brass. Krumm watched this ceremony in mild astonishment.

"What's eatin' yuh?" he piped.

"Krumm, I've just drawn yuh a pitchur of a scorpion, and the hombre whose hand's branded with it is

the Scorpion Kid, one of the worst killers in the West!" Johnny snapped back at him. "Him and his gang are thieves and murderers of the worst order!"

"I thought a scorpion was some kind o' snake," Krumm confessed. "What is it, a stingin' bug?"

"Yuh'll think so, before we're through with the Scorpion Kid!" Johnny Forty-five told him grimly. "Why they let yuh off with yore life, knowin' yuh was an officer, is beyond me—unless they thought it a good joke to show up Uncle Sam's law. We'll still show 'em it isn't! Come on! And get a wiggle on yuh!"

CHAPTER II.

ANOTHER NOTCH FOR THE SCORPION.

THE two deputy marshals hastened to the livery stable fast enough, but, when they got there, they found that their birds had flown. The "crapshooters" who had deprived Krumm of all his money and belongings had swung aboard their broncs and left the sleeping town of Mica for parts unknown.

The only one left in the dimly-lit livery stable, where, by the way, Johnny Forty-five's own horse was quartered, was the proprietor of the place. He was an untidy, ferret-eyed hombre who had just settled down on his dusty pile of blankets when the two officers entered.

Johnny questioned the man politely—at first. The liveryman, however, had a tendency to be surly and sneering, even after Johnny, who, unlike Krumm, never wore his badge in sight, flashed his government credentials. The man had seen one United States marshal made a fool of, and he probably thought that all marshals were the same, and could be trifled with. Johnny changed his tactics and showed him differently!

"Now will yuh talk, and pronto?
My patience shore is boggin',
Just start yore palaver or yuh shore will gather
Some knuckles in yore noggin!"

The liveryman was the heavier, but Johnny caught him by the shirt front as he would have grasped a child by its pinafore. Lifting the vainly struggling hombre from his feet, he pinned him against the wall with a straight-arm that was like a bar of steel. The stableman decided, right then and there, that it would be best for him to tell what he knew.

"Honest, Mr. Marshal, I . . . I never seen them hombres ontil todays!" he yammered. "If they're wanted by the law I didn't know it! They brought their hosses in fer feed and a rubdown, an' o' course I—"

"Yuh seem to have been entertainin' 'em here mighty hospitable-like," drawled the rhyming marshal without relinquishing his hold on the squirming stableman. "How long have they been gone, and where were they goin'? Speak up!"

"They skittered out 'bout an hour ago, but honest, Mr. Marshal, I dunno whar they was headin'. They left town, I think."

"What were their names? Shorely, yuh heard what they called each other?" Johnny questioned relentlessly.

"One of them, a leetle green-eyed younker, they called 'Scorp'," the man panted.

"Yes, I know that—who were the others?" Johnny Forty-five wanted to know.

"Well, one was named Hackory, and thar was a great big feller they called Sam Wendigo," the stableman gasped. "One was Jack Metro, but I ain't shore of the others. In all,

thar was six of 'em. They all had Winchesters and Colts, too. I didn't know—"

The man's tongue was lolling out and Johnny let him down. There was still more, though, that he wanted to learn.

"What kind of cayuses was they forkin' when they pulled away from here?"

"Two blacks, a buckskin, two roans, and a kind of *bayo coyote* with dark markin's," said the liveryman, who seemed willing enough to help, now that he knew that Johnny Forty-five meant business.

"Any other description that will help?" Johnny barked at him.

The other scratched his head reflectively. "Nope. Wait—now I think of it, the buckskin cayuse, the one the big feller Wendigo was ridin', had a busted shoe. Right hind shoe, it was, and it was bad cracked, Mr. Marshal."

"Glad to hear it." Johnny nodded his thanks. "That ought to make trailin' 'em easier. Did yuh say somethin', George?" he grinned at his pardner, who had been plucking at his elbow.

The fat deputy's double chins were quivering with the after-midnight chill. His teeth were chattering, and Johnny could hardly wonder at it.

"Fer the love o' Pete, Johnny, ask him whar I can git some duds!" Krumm moaned. "I'm froze stiff."

"Well, let's hope yore *backbone* stays that way, George," his partner chuckled, but he turned to the liveryman, asking him where an outfit could be provided immediately for the fat deputy.

"Whalen's Store is the only place I know of, at this time of night," the

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man responded. "He lives in the back of his store right acrosst the alley, but he's a rich ol' skinflint and not very obligin'. Yuh might try him, anyhow."

Krumm meekly followed Johnny's instructions and signed a paper agreeing to repay the stableman for the price paid for his horse and saddle, and was thus able to regain possession. Then the two officers slapped their hulls aboard their broncs and rode them out of the livery barn into the street. Then they jogged along through the darkness until they reached Whalen's Store. Krumm's teeth were clicking harder than ever, for the chill wind of dawn was creeping out of the east.

"I don't see no lights in thar, Johnny," Krumm chattered. "Let's go 'round to the back whar thet hombre said his room was. He's got to open, in the name o' the Law! I never been so cold in my life!"

Dismounting, they rapped loudly at the rear door, fumbling their way through the gloom.

There was no answer to their knockings, but to Johnny's surprise when he touched the knob accidentally the door swung inward. A sharp piece of metal raked his fingers and told him that the lock had been forcibly broken.

"There's somethin' wrong here, George," he muttered, and as if in response, he heard a sound that made his scalp tingle and tighten on his head. It was a death rattle, the last horrible, spasmodic breathings of a dying man.

CHAPTER III.

A TWISTED TRAIL.

JOHNNY FORTY-FIVE, catching his breath in the darkness, stepped blindly forward through the opening, then scratched a match on his boot sole and made a light. Krumm was right in back of him—and breathing hard on his neck.

"Wh-what is it, J-J-Johnny?" quavered the fat deputy, for the flare of the match had momentarily dazzled them both.

"It looks like—murder," muttered the younger marshal, when his contracting pupils had accustomed him to the light.

He reached up and lighted the big, brass kerosene lamp that was suspended by a chain from the ceiling. The room was filled now with a ghastly radiance except in the far corners where shadows danced and wavered grotesquely because of the slight swinging of the lamp. There were the usual shelves and rows of counters, stacked with all sorts of nondescript merchandise, and in the near corner, next to the opening of the little back room, an opened safe.

But what drew their horrified eyes was the pitiable figure that was stretched out on the floor near the middle of the room. It was the body of a gray-haired man surrounded by a dull red pool. The victim, who was laboring for his last breaths, was watching them with glazed, wide-open eyes and trying desperately to speak.

Johnny Forty-five was at his side in a moment. He lifted the man's head, but he could see at a glance that Whalen, if this were he, had no chance to live. Crimson was still welling slowly from a hole in the thin throat, and he had been beaten and tortured as well.

"Deputy United States marshal talkin' to yuh, sir. Can yuh hear me?" Johnny asked gently, yet sharply, too, for he knew that this man's life was ebbing fast.

"Can hear . . . been robbed, beat up . . . six men . . . made me

tell safe combination . . . five thousand dollars—"

The words came slowly and gaspingly, and Johnny had to put his ear close to the storekeeper's lips to make them out.

"Know any of 'em?"

The head shook slowly from side to side. "No . . . strangers," the stricken man whispered. "One of 'em had blue mark one . . . left hand. I can't—"

The words ceased—forever, for the brain that conceived them had been extinguished by the shadowy hand of Death. Another notch for the Scorpion Kid and his evil crew of killers! The outfit had occupied themselves in Mica with grimmer things than the laughable duping of Deputy Krumm!

"He's gone," Johnny gritted as he got to his feet. His eyes swept the store in a swift glance. "Yuh'll find everything yuh'll need here, George, so outfit yoreself and hurry up about it. Time's precious. We'll settle for it later."

The fat officer hastily followed Johnny's suggestions, though it was some time before he found a pair of boots big enough for him to squeeze his huge feet into. He had less difficulty with the other clothing, though most of the hats were too large, and he was soon dressed for the business at hand.

"Don't forget a Colt and ammunition," Johnny reminded him, and the beefy deputy slid open Whalen's gun case and helped himself to a belted and holstered .45 and a box of cartridges. By now the first dim glow of dawn was glimmering out of the east.

By the time they got aboard their horses it was light enough for them to see the ground, and soon Johnny picked up the trail of the killers. It led directly south out of Mica, following the main wagon road.

The liveryman had been right, for one of the gang's broncs certainly did have a badly broken shoe. It left excellent sign, except when smothered out by the shod hoofs of the other horses, and Johnny had every hope of keeping their trail in sight and, eventually, running them down. The gang had a start of only a few hours, at most. They had no suspicion, probably, that they were being followed.

He soon found, however, that tracking down the Scorpion Kid's band wasn't to be an easy task. The bandit leader was crafty, and as soon as he was well out of the Mica district he swung directly east into the wilderness. He left the road at such a rocky, lava-studded spot that the officers had to back trail several times before they discovered what the gang had done.

There it was again, however, the mulled sand, the broken vegetation and overturned stones that marked the killers' spoor. By dismounting and searching carefully for the mark of the cracked horseshoe, the rhyming deputy verified it. The gang was traveling at a good, fast clip, keeping well together.

"I hope we can run these rats into their holes, Johnny!" said Krumm, who had regained his spirits—and his boastfulness. "By gollies, I can't hardly wait ontil I git 'em over the sights of this yere hawgleg!" And he patted his holstered gun impressively.

"Don't get those hombres too *far* over yore sights," hinted his pard with a chuckle. "I hope yuh do better shootin' than yuh did the last time we was on a case together."

"I accounted fer five or six men in thet last gun scrap, if I remember right," Krumm said with digni-

fied pride. "Why, Johnny, I was battlin' crim'nals afore you was high enough to reach stirrup leather! Iron Man Krumm, Terror o' Evildoers, they called me, and I'll never forget how I won that name. It was the time I downed thet dread Bull gunman. His name was Bull somethin' or other. I can't rightly remember his last name, but—"

"Was it Bull Ownie?" drawled Johnny Forty-five as he rolled one of those cigarettes he never smoked. There was a gleam in his eye that should have warned his fat pard.

"Yeah, thet's the name—Bull Ownie!" Krumm cried, slapping his leather-clad leg heartily. "He was the wust killer in Colorado, an' he—" Krumm paused. A hurt look crossed his red face and he repeated, to himself, the name that Johnny had supplied. "Bull Ownie. Say!" he roared suddenly. "If yuh think yuh can poke foolery at me thetaway, or if yuh think I'm lyin'—"

He was somewhat mollified, however, when Johnny gave voice to a song of praise:

"Why, George, yo're the fightin'est hombre,
That ever let go with a Colt!
Sometimes I think yo're a hero,
And sometimes I think yo're a dolt."

"Glad yuh finally admit it," the fat deputy grunted. "But what does 'dolt' mean, anyhow?"

"I just put it in there because it makes a good rhyme," chuckled Johnny Forty-five.

Deputy Krumm clutched the saddlehorn and tried to ease himself more comfortably in his seat. He was rather a poor rider, and about as graceful in his stirrups as an oversized sack of bran.

"If yuh'll take my advice, Johnny, yuh'll quit makin' up them loco pomes," he said after a pause. "It gives me headaches tryin' to figger 'em out. Yes, siree, Johnny, if yuh'll jist foller my example yuh'll be a crack law officer some day. I think yuh've got it in yuh, even if yuh *are* a leetle harebrained. And I wish yuh'd stop twistin' up them cigaroots!" he added.

Johnny Forty-five grinned without answering him, for his trail-wise eyes were intent on the smudgy jumble of tracks they were following.

They were in a semiarid region now. On all sides of them were broken ridges of red and gray lava, some of them more than a thousand feet in height and timbered sparsely at their harsh summits. The noon hour was approaching and the heat increased as they drove their way through the endless sea of cat's-claw and mesquite. In that clear air they could see for miles, and in the far distance they made out the scattered adobes of a fair-sized town.

"We could rest and freshen up thar a bit," said Krumm hopefully, but Johnny shook his head.

"We're follerin' this trail if it leads to the devil himself!" he muttered, and then he glanced more attentively at the far-off settlement. "That must be Gila Wells. Never been there, but it's on the map."

"We could git a drink thar—of water," Krumm tacked on quickly as he caught Johnny's eye. "Well, what are yuh stoppin' fer? Yuh see somethin'?"

"Yes—this!" snapped Johnny Forty-five. He had dismounted and picked up a broken horseshoe, bright and unrusted. "It's the busted shoe on Sam Wendigo's buckskin bronc."

It seemed to be beyond the fat deputy's comprehension. He stared at his astonishing young partner and, shoving back his new Stetson, clawing his head in perplexity.

"Well—what about it, Johnny?" he gaped.

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"Don't yuh see all these boot marks? Wendigo knew his hoss had thrown a shoe, because he got down and looked at it, so did some of the others," Johnny explained. "They know what it means for a bronc to throw a shoe in this lava country—it means that it will go lame unless reshed pronto! Yuh can be shore that they don't want to be bothered with any lame cayuse while they're escapin' with murder loot!"

"Then they'll head fer town to git it shod?" Krumm grunted.

"That's where they're headin' right now!" announced the smaller deputy. He had walked over to a rise of ground where he could get a good view of the surrounding country. Then he pointed out a faint smudge of hazy dust in the direction of a grove of paloverdes.

"It's the gang," said Johnny, his voice taking on a harsh note. "We've been gainin' on 'em for hours. They are makin' straight for town now, to get that cayuse attended to. But we can beat 'em there by takin' a cut-off straight up the hill yonder—if we ride hard! Let's pound leather!"

CHAPTER IV.

SETTIN' THE STAGE.

JOHNNY FORTY-FIVE and his beefy partner did make fast time into Gila Wells, though the latter suffered much jarring punishment from the pace that Johnny set, and clung to his saddlehorn for most of the distance.

Gila Wells was like many another desert town, a collection of ugly, flat-roofed buildings, most of them of one story and of adobe, but with a few of garishly painted frame, the favorite colors being pink and yellow. Huge cottonwoods grew here and there, and in the center of the wide, rutted main street were the wells that gave the desolate settle-

ment its name. There was a public watering tank there, topped by a huge wooden windmill.

"Not much of a place," sighed Krumm.

"Keep yore eyes open," his pard warned. "A lot can happen in a place like this, and I got a hunch it's goin' to!"

They had come in at the lower end of the town, feeling sure that the six horsemen they were trailing would enter at the upper. There was a strange, tight feeling now in Johnny's chest, although his pulses were beating calmly enough. It was a sensation he always experienced before a gun storm! He could *feel* something coming.

Johnny was a pretty good judge of men, and he was sure that hombres such as the Scorpion Kid and his crew would first of all think of wetting their whistles at one of the town's saloons. They'd do this before attending to any other business, and that would give him and Krumm a few minutes in which to get ready. Or so he hoped!

"Here's the blacksmith shop," he said, grinning mirthlessly, and he knew that they were lucky to find it at this end of the settlement. "Here's where we stop, George. You ride yore hoss around to the back. The gang might reco'nize it if they see it."

Johnny himself ambled in through the big, wide-open front door, as was customary whenever an hombre wanted any service done. He didn't look much like an officer at that moment; just a cheerfully grinning young saddle tramp in faded range clothes.

"Howdy!"

Johnny always liked the warm, pungent smell of a blacksmith shop, and even on a hot day the odor of steam, hoof pairings, cinders and hot iron was a blend that he welcomed. A steady and rhythmic *clang-clang-clang* was coming from the anvil, near the rear, and in the dimness of the place he could see the red sparks as the steel was struck.

The blacksmith, a brawny, middle-aged hombre with his sleeves rolled nearly to his powerful shoulders, didn't turn immediately from his work, and Johnny dismounted, leading his horse by the bridle.

"Be with yuh in a jiffy, young feller," said the smith, nodding to him and dousing the hammered iron into his water tub. A puff of steam came up, thinned and disappeared as the smith plunged another rod of steel into the white coals of his forge and began turning the mechanical bellows with a circular motion. He looked around then, glancing at Johnny's bronc.

"Want me to shoe yore hoss, kid?" he asked.

"No," Johnny told him gravely. "How far do yuh live from here?"

It was a surprising question, and the smith stared at him before answering. "I live jist a coupla streets away," he blurted. "Why?"

"Well, you get home as fast as yuh can—and stay there," advised the unsmiling Johnny Forty-five.

"Why yuh—yuh—yuh smart leetle—" The big blacksmith had doubled up his hamlike fists. He took a step toward Johnny, then a step backward out of sheer amazement when the law kid sang:

"Just keep yore shirt on, blacksmith,
And listen to this tune!
I'm a deputy U. S. marshal,
And there's trouble comin' soon!"

The smith swallowed a couple of times, then stared at the small silver badge that Johnny had taken from his pocket. He got a good look at it.

"Wh-what do yuh aim I should do, Mr. Deputy?" he stammered.

"Go home until the trouble that I'm expectin' is over," Johnny grinned. "The gover'ment is takin' over yore shop for the time bein'. I'm tellin' yuh this, amigo, because some hot lead is liable to be buzzin' soon, and I don't want yuh to get hurt."

"Yessir!" gasped the smith. He snatched up his coat and fled back through the rear door of the smithy with all the alacrity of an hombre who'd just upset a beehive. He was gone in a twinkling.

Johnny led his horse out to where his fat partner was waiting for him, and he tied both of their broncs to a tree near the rear door. There was a far-off look on Krumm's round face.

"Johnny," he said, "I think yo're wrong about all this. I don't believe them scamps headed into town at all. No, siree, thet cloud o' yellar haze yuh claimed yuh saw was just one of them dust devils thet the wind is allus stirrin' up."

"Plenty of things will be stirred up right pronto, and yuh can bank on that, George," said Johnny with a faint grin. He grabbed the fat officer by the arm and took him into the shop. Near the rear door was a small tool room set off from the rest by a wooden partition.

"Now you get in there, George," snapped the rhyming deputy. "The men in that gang have all seen yuh, and I don't want 'em to know what's up until I'm ready for the fireworks."

"So I'm to stay in yere, eh?" the fat deputy grumbled. "Fer how long?"

"Till you're needed. When I *need* help—when the thing begins—you come out a-smokin'. Savvy?"

Krumm said he savvied, and Johnny hurried into the main part of the shop, threw off his batwing chaps, and his Stetson. He also unbuckled his spurs and tossed them aside with his gun belts. If he intended to play blacksmith, he would have to avoid looking like a cowboy. One of his guns, however, he thrust inside the slack of his shirt. Then he rolled up his sleeves and tied on the smith's leather apron.

There was no looking glass in that grimy place, but Johnny decided that he would pass—except maybe for size. He picked up one of the blacksmith's hammers and beat out a clanging tune on the anvil, shouting to its ringing:

"'Under the spreadin' chestnut tree the village smithy stands! The smith a mighty man is he, with large an' sinewy hands—'"

That was as far as Johnny got, for a shadow fell across the floor, and a horse and rider slowly entered through the front of the shop! It was a buckskin cayuse, and, judging from the description, the burly, frowning jasper in the saddle was Sam Wendigo.

CHAPTER V.

A FIGHT ON HIS HANDS!

JOHNNY FORTY-FIVE looked past Wendigo, expecting to see others of the Scorpion Kid's outfit, but thus far nobody else had shown up. The huge bandit had come to the smithy alone, and whether he planned to meet his pards here or elsewhere was something Johnny could still only guess at.

Sam Wendigo sat slightly bent over his saddlehorn, looking down at the "blacksmith" with a surly, unfriendly eye. He was certainly a big fellow, Johnny thought, and he had never seen a wider chest or more ponderous shoulders.

The bandit, somewhat dust-cov-

ered, was wearing black chaparajos and a double-breasted green shirt with two rows of pearl buttons. He was a left-handed gunman, for, protruding from his left thigh, was the ivory butt of a six-gun, and he was wearing no other. Rigged to his lavishly carved stock-saddle was a Winchester carbine in a leather boot. The taps of his stirrup leathers were so long that they nearly reached the ground.

"I need a shoein' job," said Wendigo in a rumbling growl, fixing his evil black eyes on Johnny.

"For yoreself or yore hoss?" asked Johnny politely.

The half-pint deputy always got himself into jams that way—he just couldn't help it! It got him into a lot of gun smoke, generally. Not that he objected to gun smoke. Sometimes, though, Johnny's impudent sense of humor brought the trouble on prematurely, before he was quite ready for it.

"Yuh leetle sawed-off whippersnapper!" roared Wendigo, his face darkening with wrath. "If yuh're tryin' tuh git gay with *me*—"

Fooling with this evil-tempered giant was like fiddling with a grizzly bear, but Johnny Forty-five just couldn't resist.

"Just excuse it, mister,
I wouldn't think o' gettin' gay,
But just the same I've got a hunch
That this will be a busy day."

Wendigo stared at Johnny in blank amazement, then broke into a hoarse guffaw of contemptuous laughter. He was a stupid lout of a man, but his wide lips were crueller than a wolf's.

"You're a queer one, bub, I must say," he sneered as he piled off his buckskin cayuse. "Now git busy with thet shoe. I don't want one too heavy."

Johnny Forty-five had tacked on many a horseshoe, but he had never worked as a blacksmith before and he wasn't sure he could do the job just as an expert farrier would. He tried to remember just what a horseshoer did first, and although he had watched the work many a time, he couldn't quite remember. So he decided to heat the shoe. He stirred up the fire in the forge, making a dense, choking smoke.

Wendigo gagged, coughed, and swore. "What in blazes are yuh tryin' tuh do, yuh locoed little squirt? Tryin' tuh choke me tuh death?"

"Nope," Johnny muttered to himself as he got a shoe at the end of a long pair of pinchers and thrust it into the coals. "The hangman's noose will do *that* for yuh."

"What did yuh say?" asked the big bandit menacingly. "I didn't quite git it!"

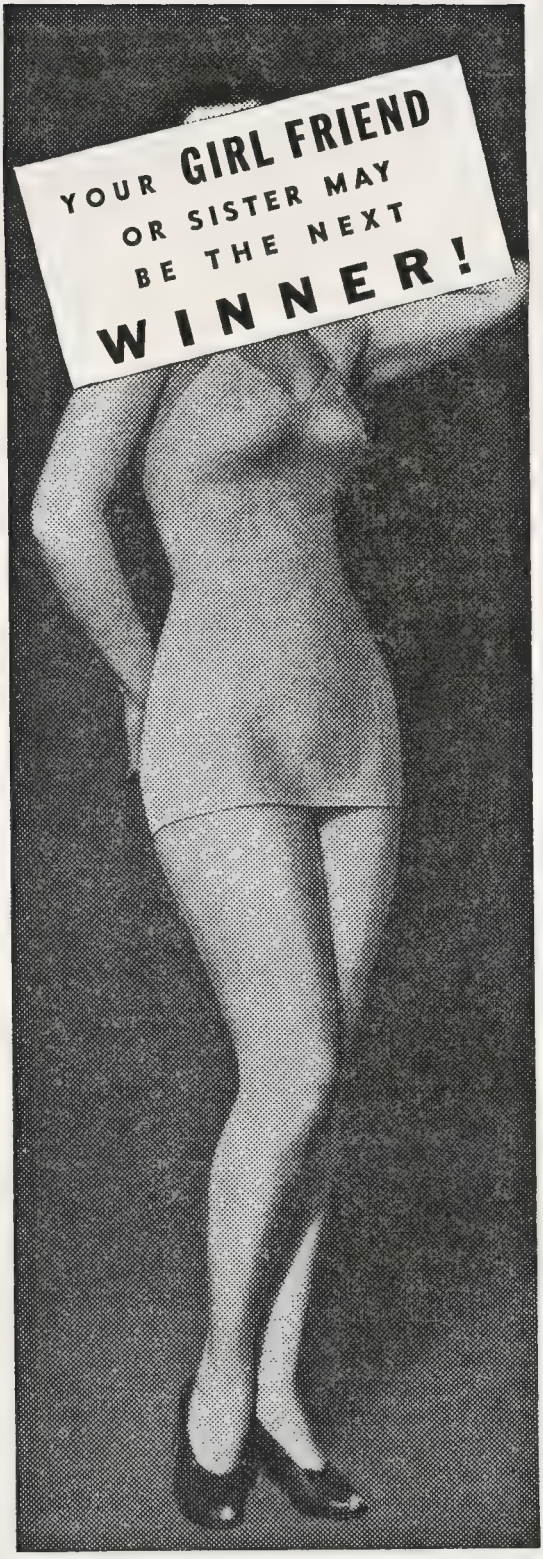
"Yuh will later," drawled Johnny. "Now will yuh please hold yore hoss by the head while I get busy?"

Sam Wendigo growlingly complied, giving the deputy a suspicious and increasingly penetrating stare. He was watching every move that Johnny made.

The rhyming deputy took the little box of rasps and other hoof-doctoring tools from its place in the corner. He set it down within reach, got the buckskin's hoof between his knees expertly enough, and went to work, first pulling out the nails of the old shoe, then digging out sharp particles of stone and paring down the hoof. The buckskin bronc was holding fairly steady, occasionally lashing with its tail at the flies.

"Hurry up, blast yuh! What kind of a blacksmith aire yuh, anyhow?" the bandit snarled. "Don't yuh savvy yore trade?"

Johnny Forty-five, who was whis-



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tling impudently, had a singsong reply to this:

"I know my little trade, sir,
Yuh can bet yore bottom dollars.
I ain't so good at hoss-shoes,
But I'm fine at fixin' collars."

And in his mind's eye he could see the collar that he would like to settle around Wendigo's bull neck! He was quite sure that he could take this man, and take him alive. It might be different with the crafty, gun-crazy killer known as the Scorpion Kid!

He had been watching the front door with a sidelong glance. Weren't the others coming for their companion, or would he finish here and go back to join them?

"*Yuh're* no blacksmith!" came Wendigo's rough, bellowing voice.

He had jumped around alongside the deputy, swinging a terrific fist that was like a mallet. It landed on the back of Johnny's neck with mighty force. Lights flashed like rockets through his brain. Then came a split instant of blackness as he felt himself spinning, heels over head.

CHAPTER VI.

MAN TO MAN SCRAPPIN'!

THE next thing Johnny saw and heard was the buckskin bronc kicking viciously at him, its hoof *whoooshing* as it whizzed past him. Johnny, who was fairly standing on his head at that instant, saw the cayuse race then, with another wild flourish of its heels, out through the back way.

But Wendigo was still there, and he rushed at the toppled deputy like some frenzied bear, his big legs lumbering awkwardly, his arms swinging.

"I'll beat yore brains out, yuh spyin' rat!" were the words that came to the deputy marshal as Wendigo charged.

The blow at the base of the skull, although delivered only with the bandit's fist, had dazed Johnny, nearly knocking him cold. By a supreme effort of will, he managed to roll over and lurch to his knees.

It was Sam Wendigo's intention to cave in the deputy's ribs with kicks from his heavy boots, but Johnny had plenty of experience at that sort of rough-and-tumble fighting. In spite of the fact that his head seemed whirling and that he could only see the giant bandit through a sort of yellowish haze, he succeeded in grasping one of Wendigo's ankles. Every dog who is kicked at knows that trick of dodging and grabbing! A quick, cougar-like twist brought the outlaw down sprawling.

Either because of that neck punch, or because he was just naturally mad, Johnny forgot all about the gun he had concealed in his shirt! He leaped toward Wendigo just as the cursing killer was staggering to his feet.

"Why, yuh danged half-pint! I'll—"

The bandit was tugging left-handedly to free his gun from its holster, but Johnny's hand had closed over a short-stocked hammer. It weighed about two pounds and he slashed with it with all his power, aiming at Wendigo's gun arm. He felt the shattering impact and he knew that the killer wouldn't be quite so quick, now, to draw that gun!

Wendigo, with his left arm dangling crazily from the elbow, was in a murderous fury. The blow that had broken his arm had knocked him back into the anvil. He lurched for a moment, then came up, swinging a sixteen-pound sledge. The blow

he whirled at Johnny would have crushed his head like an eggshell had it landed.

The deptuy dived inside the swishing arc of that steel circle and, with his lighter weapon, tried to disable Wendigo's other arm. The bandit, snarling murderous oaths, partly avoided it, but was forced to drop the heavy sledge. The weight of its momentum had nearly carried him from his feet. At the end of the swing Johnny smashed him again and sent him careening into the wall.

The time for fooling, for bantering, was past now! All the deputy could see was the pitiful, murdered body of the storekeeper of Mica as he had last seen him a few short hours before. Again and again he smashed at the outlaw, sometimes with the hammer, sometimes with his other hand. And each seemed to carry the same blinding speed and crushing power.

But Wendigo wasn't through. The giant seemed to realize now that he was fighting for his life. He didn't swear now—he needed every ounce of breath he had! Time after time he rushed Johnny, trying to grasp him in his powerful right hand. All at once he succeeded.

"And now—"

Sam Wendigo, weighing a good two hundred and twenty pounds, would have made two like Johnny, and now that he had him he shook him as a mastiff shakes its prey. With overwhelming force, he carried him into the adobe wall.

Johnny struck with a jar that rattled his teeth. All of the heavy ruffian's weight and power added to the shock. Johnny had dropped the hammer, but, with all his waning strength, he battered at Wendigo's midsection.

As the bandit pulled away, doubling with the force of the deputy's blows, Johnny raised his eyes. With all his fury he sent a curving left hook into the point of the killer's jutting, unshaven chin!

Sam Wendigo was through! Sailing backward, he toppled against the forge and sprawled into the banked coals. A puff of smoke went up and Johnny could smell scorching cloth —and flesh. Staggering from weariness, he managed to drag the unconscious desperado from the fire and drench him with water from the cooling tub.

"Number one," the deputy panted as he rolled the big hombre over. "And I came mighty near not collectin' yuh!"

He snapped one cuff of a pair of manacles around Wendigo's right wrist, the other around the base of an iron pipe that was solidly set in cement and which supported the ceiling timbers. Sam Wendigo would be there until called for!

When Johnny went back to see what had become of Krumm he heard the gentle sound of snoring. The fat deputy marshal was slumbering peacefully!

Too used to his pard's shortcomings to be either angry or much surprised, the rhyming deputy shook him awake. Krumm spluttered, yawned and stretched, then blinked up bewilderedly at Johnny Forty-five.

"Huh? What's—uh—what's the matter? Did anything happen, Johnny? I jist dozed off fer a minute. Nothin' happened, huh?"

The half-pint deputy grinned, then rolled and tossed away a cigarette, just to make sure that his trigger fingers would be able to function if, and when, needed.

"Why, nothin' much at all, George,
But a little wholesome fun;
Just did a little rasslin'
With a *gentle* son of a gun."

Krumm's eyes bulged and he scratched his head in perplexity. "Golly, yuh mean I slept through somethin'? I'm sorry, Johnny, but I was so tired out from my long ride—"

"Come in and have a look at our first customer," Johnny suggested with a chuckle.

Krumm came lumbering into the shop, just as Wendigo was regaining his senses. The big hombre was groaning profanely, grinding his teeth with rage and pain. Krumm's chest swelled out at the sight of him.

"Well, so it's yuh, hey?" Krumm bellowed fiercely. "Thought yuh'd make mock o' U. S. law, did yuh? I *told* yuh last night what happens to jaspers thet buck up ag'in us marshals!"

"Whar in blazes did yuh come from?" Wendigo snarled amazedly. "Why, you fat windbag! Yuh—"

"Enough of this," said Johnny sternly. "Where are yore pards? Where's the Scorpion Kid?"

Wendigo had a stomachful of Johnny and he wanted no more! He cringed away from him as far as the handcuff would allow, his big, bloated face twitching.

"They're all a-waitin' fer me in a saloon up the street," he said hoarsely.

"What's the name of the place?" Johnny's voice crackled. He had already divested himself of his blacksmith's apron and was putting on his chaps and buckling up his gun belts.

Wendigo was quite willing to talk. No doubt he thought that the Scorpion and his cronies would make short work of the two officers if they ventured there.

"They're in the Domino, drinkin' at the bar—all except Scorp," came through the beaten bandit's bruised lips.

"Where's Scorp?"

"He went upstairs," muttered Wendigo. "Thar's some kind o' gamblin' game goin' on up thar—one thet only Scorp knowed how to play."

"Maybe I can play it, too," said Johnny, grinning cheerfully. "I like all kinds o' games. In most of 'em, I've found, bullets is trumps. Hey, Krumm! Come on!"

He found the fat deputy out at the rear of the shop again. He had caught up Sam Wendigo's buckskin bronc and was feverishly going through the bandit's bedroll and saddle pockets. Already, it seemed, he had found something, for he was beaming.

"Money, Johnny! Lots of it! All this jasper's share of the swag is yere! Yere's whar I gits my six dollars back, by gollies!"

"Don't yuh touch a cent of that dinero, George!" Johnny warned him sternly. "Later on I'll put it under seal. In the meantime, lead that cayuse into the shop and we'll tie him up."

"All right," grunted Krumm disappointedly, when this had been done. "And now what?"

"Now we really get down to work," said Johnny with a cold and humorless grin. "We're makin' a little call on those folks in the Domino."

CHAPTER VII.

DEALIN' DEATH IN THE DOMINO.

THE two deputies quickly but carefully reconnoitered the Domino Saloon and its immediate vicinity, riding down the alley behind it and then surveying it from two sides. It occupied one of the few two-story buildings in Gila Wells, but there was no outside stairway, and if the Scorpion Kid was still upstairs—provided that Wendigo had

Johnny killed Hackory at the first shot, spinning him around on the heels of his boots and dropping him between the brass rail and the bottom of the bar.

not lied about his being there—there was no escape for him except through the saloon part below.

The town was quiet, for it was siesta time, the period when the inhabitants napped or lazed away the hot hours between two and four. On the shady side of the main street several citizens were loafing, but the sunny side, where the Domino stood, was deserted. Five horses, stamping and switching their tails at the flies, stood at the hitch rail in front and indicated that their owners were still within.

"Now George, bein' as these skunkaroos know yuh and *don't* know *me*, I want yuh to post yoreself at the rear door, in the alley," instructed the singing deputy. "I'll go in first, through the front, savvy? I'll get the drop and take 'em without firin' a shot, if possible, but I hardly think they'll let me. When it starts, you come in through the back way. Get it?" There was no foolery now. Johnny was speaking tensely and his voice was hard.

Krumm nodded wisely. "Yuh can count on *me*, Johnny. We'll wipe them buzzards out."

"Well—here goes."

After making sure that Krumm was safely at his post, Johnny Forty-five cantered around the half block, came up the narrow side street, turned, and came to a leisurely halt in front of the Domino. He dropped the reins, leaving his horse a few yards away from the Scorpion gang's.

Crossing the wooden sidewalk, Johnny barged in through the swinging doors. His step was light and nonchalant, and the same old impudent grin was on his face. Inwardly he was like ice—as if Death, which entered with him, had cast a chill over his heart. He realized that his chances of coming out of this place alive were rather less than even!

After the hot sun-dazzle, the interior of the long, low-ceilinged room was pleasantly cool. It was dim, but not too dim, he thought unconsciously, for an hombre to see what his guns were doing!

"Hi, yuh, cowhand," greeted the fat bartender gruffly.

The keen, half-veiled eyes of Johnny Forty-five took in the situation at a glance—and his heart sank within him. It seemed that his plans had gone haywire!

The four outlaws he expected to see were there, rightly enough. They were standing together at the bar, about halfway down the room, their voices upraised in loud talk. The Scorpion Kid, evidently, was still upstairs. So far, so good.

Right in the middle of the bandit bunch, however, with a pair of them on either side of him, was a citizen of the town, a gray-haired, respectable-looking hombre in neat "store" clothes. He'd had more liquor than was good for him. He was so drunk, in fact, that he had one hand laid affectionately on the shoulder of one gunman and was talking shrilly to another.

"He'll be kilt shore if I start anything," thought Johnny with an inward groan. "*Por que?* What for did I ever take a deputy job anyhow? Why does everything have to happen to me? Looks like this time I bit off more'n I can chew!"

"What'll yuh have, younker?" growled the barkeep, as Johnny leaned sidewise against the bar, between the outlaw group and the front door.

"*Cerveza,*" ordered Johnny Forty-five, and when the bottle of beer came he nursed it along as slowly as he could, listening and watching, with al his nerves atingle.

A cluster of half-emptied whiskey and beer bottles stood on the bar in front of the group. The gang had been drinking heavily, too, but none, except the unfortunate townsman, was drunk. They were humoring him along, probably trying to see what they could get out of him.

"As mayor o' Gila Wells," the unsteady citizen was saying, "I want tuh welcome yuh to our town! Thash what we're noted for—horshpitality! I like yuh. All you boysh seem fine, upstandin' hombres. Want yuh all to feel at home here. Yesshir."

The gang sniggered with laughter. "Come on, drink up, Thorrell," one of them said, guffawing. "Let's have another drink on thet!"

Johnny's shoulders sagged. "The poor old coot is the *mayor,*" he thought dismally. "I *can't* start anything with him among 'em. Well, I got to think up a different plan and that's a cinch."

"Did any of you gennlemensh ever work on the ol' Box M, over Whetstone Mountain way?" the mayor was asking his "cronies."

All of them, of course, said they had been old Box M hands, and the talk became louder and more hilarious. Johnny, who was getting more and more fidgety, decided to try and call the old man away from the desperate crew. As he was the mayor, Johnny might pretend to have business with him. Walking back of the mayor, he touched him on the shoulder.

"Can I have a few words with yuh in private, sir?" he asked quietly. "It's important."

The Gila Wells official turned around and stared at Johnny vacantly.

"Don' know you," he mumbled petulantly. "Go 'way!"

"Yeah!" snarled the hombre called Thorrell, an evil-eyed man of forty. "You clear out, *muchacho!* Hornin' in on us ain't healthy!"

"We don't like yore looks, youngun!" rasped the bandit they called Woodruff. "Vamoose!"

It was no go, and Johnny returned to his almost untasted bottle of beer to think things over. Should he leave, rejoin Krumm, and make other plans?

He had sized up the desperadoes with a cold and attentive eye. Hackory and Woodruff were tough hombres, two-gun men both, and probably Thorrell was equally dangerous. The fourth man, who was nearest Johnny at the moment, was Jack Metro, a wolfishly sneering desperado with a sloping forehead and deadly black eyes that seemed to be fixed, most of the time, on Johnny Forty-five. The deputy knew that if he did anything at all here he would have to do it soon.

"Sam Wendigo ought to be showin' up soon," Metro growled. "He's had plenty o' time to git his cayuse shoed."

"Oh, what's the hurry?" sniggered Hackory. "It ain't often thet we git the chance to drink with a shore-nuff mayor. Fill 'em up, barkeep!"

Johnny decided to go upstairs and try to capture the Scorpion Kid. The fight might just as well be started there as anywhere, he thought. Possibly he could make the Scorpion Kid a hostage in order to get the others.

There were three doors at the back of the long room. One of them, which was open, led to the alley, another to the washroom, and the third, he suspected, to the room above. He turned and started for it.

"Hey, cowhand!" barked the bartender. "Yuh cain't go up thar. Thar's a gamblin' game goin' on thar

and it costs yuh five hundred smackers to sit in!"

"What kind of a game?"

"Fan-tan," growled the barkeep. "And yuh pay yere, afore yuh climb them stairs. Afore yuh go, I got to see the color of yore money!"

Well—that was that! Johnny started to return to his place at the bar and then, just when he least expected it, he got the break he'd been hoping for.

The drunken mayor, who suddenly seemed to be feeling far from well, left the desperadoes and went lurching into the washroom. The coast, at last, was clear!

Johnny lost no time! A catlike leap took him to the middle of the room, to a point opposite the gunmen quartet. Their backs were still turned, but they didn't stay that way long! Johnny's voice rang out like the beating of a brass bell:

"Reach up for the ceilin'
And stretch yore elbow joints,
Or else these two Colt sixes
Will shoot just where they points!"

As the bandits whipped around, with their hands clawing at their holstered guns, Johnny dusted his own Colt handles! His draw was blindingly fast, and his big, blued namesakes were thundering destruction as they snapped from the leather! Johnny had known these killers wouldn't surrender—and somehow, he wasn't sorry!

With his half-pint body bent at a crouch, the deputy side-stepped, then came boring in at the desperadoes. Their guns, too, were in action, and the uproar of the exploding .44s and .45s rocked the building from top to bottom.

The Scorpion gang might have been experts at the art of killing, but they were up against a tiger, now! Johnny had killed Hackory at the first shot, spinning him around on the heels of his boots and dropping him between the brass rail and the bottom of the bar. Woodruff, too, was hit, but he continued to shoot.

And for once in his life, at least, Deputy U. S. Marshal George Krumm wasn't asleep at the switch! As graceful as a buffalo bull, he came blundering in through the back door, his gun roaring.

Johnny found himself wishing, though, that Krumm had kept out of it. The fat deputy was never too good a shot, and now he seemed particularly wild. Johnny ducked backward toward the wall as he heard one of Krumm's bullets drone by, a few inches from his head. Two more of Krumm's crazily aimed shots smashed out the front windows and bored the mirror behind the counter.

The bartender had flattened himself behind the bar when the shooting had first begun. The mayor of Gila Wells had no doubt suddenly sobered. At least he was having the good sense to stay where he was!

Thorrell and Jack Metro moved in toward Johnny. Woodruff, ghastly white from the body wound that was gnawing at him, clung to the bar top with one hand, but his Colt still flamed wickedly in the other. For a moment Johnny dared not pull trigger again for fear of getting his fat pard in line with his shots. Krumm, though, had no fear of hitting Johnny. Again his gun roared.

By some sort of miracle, he hit Thorrell, getting him between the shoulders. Thorrell plunged forward through the smoke and landed, stone-dead, almost at Johnny's feet.

Again two bright pencils of flame came lancing from the hip-high muzzles of Johnny's Colt namesakes.

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At the same instant, Jack Metro's gun blazed, and Johnny felt the hot blast of the burning powder grains on his neck as the bullet clipped the tip of his shoulder.

A shiver ran through Metro. He stopped in mid-stride, his gun slithering from his limp hand. He bent forward, coughing, then fell heavily in a splatter of crimson. Johnny's two slugs, fired simultaneously, had caught him below the heart.

Johnny whirled nimbly, warned by a premonition. The stairway door had popped open, and he caught his first glimpse of the hombre he knew to be the Scorpion Kid. He was a man not much older than Johnny, and not much larger. But Johnny, in that flashing look he had of the bandit, had never seen a crueller, more vicious face. The naturally buck teeth were bared and slavering.

A spangle of fire appeared at the Scorpion's hip and Johnny felt the *whoosh* of his bullet as it mushroomed the air alongside his ear. The deputy's guns beat out a swift *rat-a-tat* in return, and the gang leader changed his mind about fighting his way out into the room. With splinters from the door jamb showering all about him, he turned with a bound and vanished back up the stairs.

"Are yuh all right, George?" Johnny yelled through the graveyard silence that had suddenly fallen upon the Domino.

The fat deputy was all right. In a welter of glasses and gurgling bottles, he was sitting on the floor, holding down the weakly struggling Woodruff. On Krumm's round face was a look of triumphant dignity.

"I *told* yuh we'd teach these buzzards to respeck U. S. law!" he crowed. "Cheat me outn my duds, will they? By gollies, I've showed 'em—well, whar are *you* goin', Johnny?" he yelped, seeing Johnny

making a sprint for the door that led to the room above.

The rhyming deputy's reply came back in his old impudent fashion:

"Yuh done right well today, George,
First time yuh ever did!
But excuse me now, I got a date
With a gent named the Scorpion Kid!"

CHAPTER VIII.

PULLIN' THE STINGIN'-BUG'S STINGER.

JOHNNY started cautiously up the steep stairs, not knowing what he would meet in the half-darkness, but, before he was halfway up, he was taking the steps three and four at a time. He had reloaded his Colts on the way and he had one gripped in each hand—he'd need them against this Scorpion hombre!

If there had been bedlam downstairs a few moments before, upstairs seemed to be given over to a madhouse. Johnny felt as if a cyclone had just struck a barnyard overhead. He had never heard such hoglike squealings, shrill yaps and quackings, loud howls and caterwaulings as greeted him now at the top of the stairs. He couldn't imagine, at first, what it all meant.

Then he remembered the game that the bartender had said was going on up here—fan-tan. That explained it. Chinamen played that!

And the big room upstairs was full of them. Johnny paused at the threshold for a moment or two, astonished beyond measure.

A long table in the center had been overturned by the excited players and the floor was littered from one end to the other with fan-tan counters, strings of brass "cash" and paper money. There were silver dollars everywhere, stacks and piles of them.

The high-pitched jabbering and wailing were more piercing than ever now. Yellow men, their hair close cropped, but all in loose-fitting, sleazy clothes, were scuttling and milling about everywhere, cringing and dodging like scared sheep.

"No shootee! No shootee, Mistlee Melican Man!"

A concussion rattled the windows and shook the flimsy flooring as a Colt roared defiance. Johnny had been trying to spot the Scorpion among that yellow stampede. That shot showed him where the bandit leader was! The bullet nicked the deputy slightly in the thigh, too, and he went slithering sidewise—just as more staccato shots came tearing loose!

The outlaw chief was in the far end of the room, holding a terrified Chinaman in front of him as a shield. The Scorpion's left arm was pinned across his victim's body. In his right was his flame-spurting Colt.

Plaster flew from the wall all around Johnny Forty-five, but he had crouched low, and now—still holding his fire—he came stalking toward the killer, as relentless as death itself. He wasn't going to hurt that Chinaman. He *was* waiting for the opening that the Scorpion Kid must eventually give him.

He was close enough now to see the tattooed "stingin' bug" brand on the murderer's left hand. Still closer he edged, his body bent at the hips, his gun barrels unwavering. The Scorpion was moving back, and was swearing viciously.

Johnny's left-hand gun coughed flame and smoke. A pot shot! He had seen the outlaw's shoulder, for a moment, projecting above the struggling chink. The killer gave a muffled cry and staggered back into the wall. The top of his shirt had become a tatter of reddened rags.

The Chinaman squirmed loose—

and flattened himself to the floor as the guns of Johnny Forty-five cut loose in earnest. There were two quick shots, followed by a third, and the Scorpion Kid sank slowly to his knees against the sill of the window.

"Put 'em—away—law-dawg," he gasped wheezingly. "I'm—done."

His left hand clung to his shirt front as if nailed there. It was, in a way, for one of the deputy's bullets had bored through the "stingin' bug" brand and driven on through his chest.

The Scorpion Kid looked up at Johnny, his buckteeth bared in a last grimace, and in his glassy eyes was a look of stupefied wonder. He made one final effort to get to his feet, then sagged—for the last time.

Feeling a bit sick at his belt line, Johnny wormed back through the crowd of scared chinks, and descended the stairs.

He found Krumm in full glory. The fat deputy had lighted a big cigar and was stuffing his pockets with others that the pale-faced bartender was forcing upon him. He tied up the wounded prisoner and began strutting about as proud as a peacock.

"Did yuh git Scorp, Johnny?" he demanded.

Johnny nodded without speaking. He was thinking about those Chinamen up there. They were all probably in the country illegally, but he hadn't the heart to turn them in. It wasn't exactly his job, anyway, and those chinks had already been frightened out of six years' growth. His work had been to put an end to the Scorpion and his gang of murderers, and that was now accomplished.

The mayor of Gila Wells, thoroughly sober now and looking badly frightened, came up and pawed for Johnny's hand.

"Yore pardner was tellin' me, Mr. Forty-five," he gasped. "I had no idee! I had no idee a-tall thet them fellers was crim'nals. I wanta apologize—"

The mayor had given Johnny a bad five minutes, but he could grin at the hombre now.

"You had a close call, feller," Johnny said mildly. "After this, don't be so quick to take up with strangers. If you'd got caught in the middle of that gunfire there wouldn't be enough left of yuh now to stuff a boot."

Krumm was swaggering back and forth with his chest thrust out like a pouter pigeon's.

"Well, we cleaned up on 'em—jist as I knowed we would, Johnny," he beamed. "You done right well, too. I reckon yuh saw how I bowled those jaspers over right and left!"

"Yeah, I noticed that," Johnny grinned, knowing that Deputy Krumm would always be Deputy Krumm and that there was nothing that could be done about it. Deftly he rolled a brown cigarette with his left hand, then another with his right, flipping them away—much to the mayor's astonishment—unlighted and unsmoked.

"Let's go and hang on the nosebags
In the rest'rant across the street!
My stummick thinks I lost the fight—
So what do yuh say, let's eat?"

"Johnny," said the fat deputy earnestly, "I've heard yuh spout off many a pome, but believe me, this is the *first* one I ever heard thet had any sense to it!"

Most of the things thet Johnny Forty-five says and does make sense—even if Depity Krumm don't know it. Fer Johnny thinks as fast as he slings lead with those guns of his. Thar'll be another big adventure about Johnny Forty-five in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly soon.

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WE'RE plannin' to interduce the newest hand thet's drifted onto the 3W, when Johnny Forty-five plumb ropes the speech we was aimin' to spout. He grabs the beanpole by the arm an' sings:

"Step up an' meet Pole Pickett, gents.
In wranglin' he's well versed.
But watch out, 'cause yore broncs is apt
To gallop hind-end-first."

"Shore proud to shake with yuh, Pole!" says the Whistlin' Kid, an' his hand clamps onto Pole's like a sprung wolf trap. "A rodeo star like yuh don't drift thisaway every day."

"Yeah," speaks up Pecos Wilson. "Reckon we all heerd 'bout thet backward ridin' yuh done at the rodeo. Yuh must 'a' had all the gals in the gran'stand holdin' their breaths."

"Betcha Pole wa'n't holdin' hisn, though," speaks up Tie-down Johnny. "I rid a strange mule backward onct on a bet. Durned if I had any breath left to hold!"

"Yuh like pitchers, Pole?" asks Pecos Wilson.

"Depends what's in 'em," says Pole. "I likes a pitcher full o' lemonade or buttermilk or—"

"Shucks," snorts the Whistlin' Kid, "we don't mean them kind o' pitchers. Pecos means them yuh draws or paints."

"I don't draw 'em, an' I don't paint 'em," says Pole.

"Who asked yuh to?" busts out Johnny Forty-five. "Don't yuh see, Pole, all we're askin' yuh to do is look at 'em."

"Reckon I kin do thet," says Pole.

"Yuh got to help us jedge 'em, too," we adds. "Yuh see, Pole, it's Artists' Night. Hyar's the fust un. Look 'er over!" An' we hands him this pitcher:

By Melvin Johnson—Age 16
Visalia, California

"Thet shore's a sad-lookin' hombre," says Pecos Wilson. "He looks like he'd lost his best amigo."

"I ain't lookin' at the hombre so much," says The Whistlin' Kid. "I got my eyes on the hoss. Thet cayuse ain't in the same class with mine, but it's a good un, all right."

"I betcha Pole looked 'bout as cheerful as thet hombre while he was ridin' his hoss backward," chuckles Pecos Wilson. "Yuh kin put me down as votin' fer the pitcher, Boss."

We all sides him on thet, with Pole speakin' up thet he's fer it, too. Then we passes round:

By Merle Godin
Rainy River, Ontario, Canada

"Them two hombres must 'a' been in a tight spot, shore 'nough," says the Whistlin' Kid. "Thet shadder o' theirn makes it look like they had plenty light fer gunplay."

Johnny Forty-five busts out with his singsong:

"The light was too durned good, Kid,
Seein's they was in it.
The hombre they was gunnin' fer
Could plug 'em any minute."

"Yeah, thet's one way o' lookin' at it," admits Pole Pickett. "But on tother hand—"

'Fore Pole finishes, the pitcher's corralled, an' we ropes out the fust story.

THE KID PLAYS A HUNCH

By John Lapin—Age 27
Mt. Pleasant, Michigan

Kid Riley tugged his stocking-footed bay to a halt where the trail dipped down the face of Old Baldy. Below him the mining town of Queen City sprawled like a scattered jackpot, its giant stamping mill seeming to shake the very mountain that fed its smelters. Somewhere in that jumble of new pine structures was the killer of old

Charley Heckart, cashier of the Cattlemen's Bank at Spring Valley.

The slim young rider nudged his mount down the slope. Once his hand strayed to his ragged pinto vest to feel the reassuring touch of the silver star pinned beneath it. He looked more like a jobless waddy than a deputy sheriff. All his clothes had the ragged appearance of a grub-line rider's. That is all but one piece and that was a beautiful coal-black Stetson trimmed with a snakeskin band. It must have cost a month's top-hand wages.

The Kid pulled up before the Bonanza Barroom on the main street. Inside, the swamper was lighting the lamps, and as the mines had already shut down for the night the place was crowded with heavy-booted miners and the pale-faced gentry that followed them for their hard-earned wages—the gamblers.

The deputy made his way slowly to the bar, causing only casual glances from those he brushed against.

"What'll it be, stranger?" The red-nosed bartender shot the waddy a sharp glance as the newcomer hesitated before ordering.

"Root beer."

The drink was tepid and sharp. The Kid toyed with it and watched the crowd through the mirror behind the bar. It seemed to him that his eyes had rested on every face in the room and he wondered if his hunch could be wrong. He realized more than ever that he had a tough task in finding a jasper he had seen only once and that was when the killer galloped out of Spring Valley with a trail of dust behind. For the past three days the Kid had stalked the murderer's sign, never once getting actual sight of his quarry.

The evening crowd of gamblers and drinkers was gathering and the twin doors behind him were constantly swinging as hombres came and went. Outside, dusk merged into darkness and there was a star shining through one of the side windows.

Then as the Kid was about to reply to the barkeep's questioning look, that star was blotted out by someone outside. A gun showed in the dim light that seeped through the window. The deputy whirled and twisted aside and even as the pane crashed from the impact of the leaden slug, his own .38-40 Peacemaker spoke. There was no second crash of glass. The deadly pellet of the lawman drilled squarely through the jagged hole already there and even before the last tinkle of glass died away there came a scream of agony that told of death outside.

When the yell of terror faded, a score of hombres burst out through the swing doors. The Kid followed and helped bring the dead ambusher inside. Two thousand dollars in greenbacks, stolen at the price of a good man's life, were on the body and as the lawman counted them the red-nosed gent in the apron swallowed once or twice and gasped.

"That shore was fast spottin' of a bush-whacker, stranger. What could Blacky Smith have agin' yuh?"

"Reckon he jest wanted this JB of his back after losing it in a holdup in Spring Valley. Not that I blame the gent. She shore is a purty hat."

"The Kid shore done a good job," says Tie-down Johnny. "Thet bush-whacker got his needin's, shore 'nough."

"Most o' them polecats thet gits their man by bushwhackin' him, they either winds up at the end of a hemp necktie or in a hailstorm o' hot lead," opines Pecos Wilson.

"Seems like Pole had ought to tell us how he liked thet story," says the Whistlin' Kid. "Mebbe he'll come right out in the open an' tell us he's agin' it."

"But I ain't agin' it!" Pole Pickett pipes up. "I listened to every word yuh read, Boss. I calls 'er a durned good story!"

"We believes yuh, Pole," speaks up Johnny Forty-five. "'Cause I kin see by yuh waddies' faces thet yuh've all got the same opinion as Pole an' me," he tells the rest of us.

So the story's herded into the brandin' pen, an' we reads:

AN EVEN BREAK

By Elmer Sisson—Age 29
New Bedford, Massachusetts

Lon Spaulding strapped on buscadero belts, weighted by two heavy Frontier Colts that had belonged to his dad. Striding swiftly to the corral, he became aware, as always, of the meaning of those .45s. Five years ago, he had sworn to avenge the death of his dad, Henry Spaulding.

Lon's heart was pounding as he saddled

his palomino. He had heard Devil Perkins, the killer, was in Long Tom's Saloon.

Lon could picture the incident vividly, as though it were happening before his eyes this very moment. Perkins—sneaking up behind his dad, six-gun spiking from a big fist. Lon was just riding into camp when it had happened, too late to stop Perkins.

Perkins had shot his dad in the back, and hightailed with the papers to the claim he and his father had staked out in the rock-ribbed Vultures. Lon could almost see his dad now—pitching forward into the dust.

Lon forked his mount, headed for town. Could he dismiss the memory of that horrible day? Forget that Devil Perkins had jumped the claim, and later sold it?

Lon's gun speed had become legendary along the border where he hunted Perkins. He had heard Perkins himself was fast. Most men shivered at mere mention of his name. Lon had been warned to abandon his purpose.

When Lon stepped into Long Tom's Saloon, someone uttered his name. A wheezing fiddle and an off-key piano cut off abruptly. Only the squealing of batwing doors behind him broke the quiet.

Perkins was slouching against the bar. He was a big, burly hombre. He straightened slowly, his beady eyes gleaming savagely. The saloon's occupants sidled out of gun range. There was no mistaking the impending gunplay. It was written plainly on Perkins' evil face, in the deadly laxness to Lon's wide shoulders.

"You know why I'm here, Devil," drawled Lon. "I'm givin' you what you never gave my dad—an even break!"

"Yeah!" snorted Devil Perkins. "I hears yuh been wantin' to see me—bad. If yuh looked below the border, yuh coulda found me. Mebbe yuh knew an' made out yuh didn't so's yuh could brag yuh was gonna get me. Didn't figger I'd tip yore hand, an' send for yuh, did yuh? O. K., cow nurse, yuh asked for it!" Perkins' hand dipped for his six-gun.

Lon became a blur of movement. Smoke wreathed his hips, lanced through by red jets of flame. When it cleared, Perkins was clawing the air, as if reaching for some invisible support. Then, as though someone had yanked it away, he pitched to the floor, two slugs in him. A horrible expression, mingled with an unbelieving surprise, was etched on his swarthy features.

"Waal, dad," Lon whispered through tight lips. "I got him—in an even break, more'n he gave you."

"Lon likely done jest what his dad woulda had him do if he'd had his say," says Pecos Wilson. "It ain't easy to give a sidewinder an even break, but I reckon even thet pays a straight-shootin' rannihan."

"Yeah," agrees the Whistlin' Kid. "Lon wa'n't no back-shooter. He'd never 'a' forgave hisself if he'd bushwhacked his dad's killer."

Johnny Forty-five busts out with:

"It ain't the right or wrong o' things
Thet we aire hyar to weigh.
It's if the author gits a check,
Or ain't he in the pay?".

The vote says Señor Sisson's in the pay, so we looks at another pitcher:

By Henry C. Burch
Jasper, Texas

"Haw-haw!" busts out Pole Pickett. "Thet's a good un! Yuh knows how I'm votin' on thet queer-lookin' waddy, Boss."

"Me, too," chips in Johnny Forty-five. "Why didn't yuh tell me some o' them pitchers is funny pitchers? Then I'd knowed."

With thet un corralled, too, we reads another story.

PARDONED AVENGER

By Burl Long—Age 16
Richwood, West Virginia

Darkness was falling over the small cow town of Destiny as Dart Bradley rode slowly down the dusty main street. By the half light he could see that Destiny was practically the same as it had been five years ago when he had seen it last.

Framed on a rustling charge by Jake Orley, he had been sentenced to ten years in the State penitentiary, but after serving five years of his time, he was pardoned for good behavior.

He had been about twenty-two years old then, with a small spread of his own, but because Orley wasn't satisfied with owning half the range around Destiny, he started driving small ranchers out. Those who refused to give up their homes, he either framed on some charge or other, or had some hired gunman murder. Now Dart was back to end Jake Orley's crooked career.

Stopping at the livery stable, he made arrangements for the feed and care of his bronc, then pulling his wide-brimmed hat low over his eyes, he crossed the street to the Fair Chance Saloon. Pausing a few seconds in front of the saloon, he twisted a brown paper quirly, fished a match out of his pocket, snapped it alight with his thumb-nail, and held it to his quirly.

As it was Saturday night, several people were in town, and Dart suddenly got a hunch that maybe Orley would ride in, himself. So with this thought in mind, he turned and entered the saloon.

Bradley paused an instant just inside the bat-wing doors to accustom his eyes to the bright interior light. Then taking a hitch at the heavy gun belt that sagged about his lean hips, he crossed the room to the crowded bar.

"What'll you have, stranger?" asked the bartender in a gruff voice.

"A little information 'bout Jake Orley, if yuh don't mind. Is he still round these here parts?" Bradley asked.

"Yes," replied the bartender. "He owns 'bout the only big ranch 'round here."

"Does Orley come in here very often?" Bradley inquired, as he flipped the butt of his quirly away.

"Yeah," returned the bartender. "I expect he'll be in here t'night."

"Thanks," Dart replied as he settled himself to await Orley's arrival.

He had been there for about a half hour

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when in walked a big, swaggering gent with a mean look in his eyes. It didn't take a second glance for him to recognize the hombre as Jake Orley.

He waited until Orley was halfway across the room before interrupting him, then stepping away from the bar, he said in a loud, clear voice:

"I come to settle a score, Orley. I won't have to tell yuh what it is!"

Orley paused, staring hard at the hombre a few feet away. Then as recognition came to him, he turned a pasty white.

"Go fer your guns, yuh cheatin' coward!" Dart snarled at Orley.

Hoarse oaths lifted as men made a last frantic scramble for safety. Orley hesitated an instant, wet his lips; then in a draw too fast for the eye to follow, he whipped up a gun. But he never fired it.

A single shot cracked out. Orley swayed an instant on unsteady feet; a red swelling spot appeared just above his heart, then he toppled headlong to the floor.

The only white deal Orley ever handed a gent was just before he died. He cleared a man's name, a man who had wasted five of his best years in the penitentiary.

"Waal," says Pecos Wilson, "thet much was to Orley's credit, yuh got to admit."

"Mebbe," chips in the Whistlin' Kid, "but a durned sight more credit goes to Dart fer shiftin' Orley's business address to boothill."

"Seems like most o' the credit goes to Señor Long fer writin' a plumb good story," speaks up Johnny Forty-five.

Thet makes it a landslide, so the story's corralled an' we reads:

BAD MAN'S LAST WORDS

By Louis M. Hartman—Age 20
Delmar, Delaware

Black Dawson sheathed his smoking Colt with one quick movement of greased dexterity. He gave a satisfied hitch to his crisscrossing, low-hung belts and spoke to the tow-haired boy who sat on a pinto beside him:

"Everything's jake, pard. Let's get a-goin'!"

He made a quick jump and plopped neatly into the saddle on the back of his big roan. But the young man on the pinto, Pete Rivers, or Kid Cocky, as Dawson dubbed him, looked at the bad man out of cold, hostile eyes. Some kids had their Robin Hoods, but ever since he'd been able to navigate on two pins, Kid Cocky had been hepped on this Black Dawson, the best-liked and most-feared hombre the Southwest had seen in many a moon. He was nineteen now; he'd broken the fetters that tie a man down and joined up with Dawson.

"I'm not sure everything's jake, Dawson." The Kid spoke quietly, but each word seemed to be cased in steel as it left his mouth.

Dawson turned on the Kid, and his eyes glinted. He was not used to back talk from anyone.

"Kid," he spoke ominously, "when a member of my gang disagrees with me, it's an invite to draw or to turn pronto an' cur-tail it back to parts where their kind is tolerated."

The two men sat glaring at each other for some time. Finally, out of stiff lips, young Pete Rivers muttered: "Sorry, Dawson. Won't happen again." And with a tug on the reins, the two men sent up a trail of dust from the cactus-hedged boulder where some unidentified half-breed had provided Black Dawson with a human target on which to practice his skill, to Lonesome Butte, shack village some four miles to the southeast.

The only street illumination which Lonesome Butte provided was the yellow glare that flashed intermittently from the swinging doors of Four Aces, saloon and gambling den. It was before this low-pitched dive that the two pards drew rein. Black Dawson pushed open the doors and made straight for the bar.

Without a word, the barkeeper pushed a bottle of his strongest wares in front of the gunman. Kid Cocky had no use for alcohol, and watched with amazement and growing concern as Dawson, without apparent effect, downed glass after glass of the liquid fire. Finally he spoke:

"How about a little game of cards, eh, Dawson?"

Surprisingly, the swarthy-hued man agreed. It was not until the second hand that the Kid got suspicious. Then plainly he caught the other marking cards with his thumbnail. It was enough for Kid Cocky Rivers.

On his feet in a bound, he kicked the table out of the way, splattering cards over the oiled boards of the saloon floor.

"Cheat your own partner at cards, will

ya?" he thundered at Black Dawson, as his brown hand leaped for his heavy Colt. At the same time the ominous word, "Draw!" low and clear-cut, escaped from his whitened lips.

Black Dawson let out a gloating roar, and their rods spoke simultaneously. Kid Cocky's trigger arm stung with the lead Dawson sent grazing across it. But Dawson slumped to the floor, his woolen shirt sodden with the blood from a fatal wound.

In spite of himself, Pete Rivers bent over the dying man who had so cruelly disillusioned him. Dawson's eyes were wide open, though his voice was feeble and shaky.

"Yuh've helped me pay muh debt, Kid. After this, yuh'll be one hombre whose dose of outlawin' didn't take." The voice stopped and, after a brief pause, rasped out its last: "Everything's jake!"

"Waal, now," says Pecos Wilson, "thet Black Dawson jasper wa'n't sech a bad hombre, after all."

"Bad enough to be well rid of when he cashed in his chips, though," says the Whistlin' Kid.

"Did yuh like the story herself, Tie-down?" asks Pole Pickett.

"Yeah, yuh betcha I did!" busts out Tie-down Johnny. "Durned if I ever dreamed them amachoors could be so dad-blamed good!"

"An' how'd yuh like it, Panhandle Bill?" asks Pecos Wilson.

"If I'm not mistaken," says the Kid, "his pipe has put him to sleep."

"Yeah, an' half doped the rest of

Back Pain and Kidney Strain

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us," speaks up Pecos Wilson. "I'm votin' 'yes' on the story 'fore I passes out."

An' thet's the way we all votes, which leaves us free to read:

CALL OF THE RANGE

By Carma Vaughn Williams—Age 26
Oakland, California

When the full moon silvers the prairie grass,
You long for the night herd and cowboy songs.
Your feet get to itchin' for stirrups' touch,
Back on the range where a man belongs.

At the break of dawn when the breeze blows clean,
A feller's nose starts to wrinklin' round
To catch the scent of the high, far hills
Unmarred by the smoke of a man-made town.

When the sun comes to rest on the mountain's rim,
Painting bright colors across the blue
In a blaze of glory that's like a song
And tinting the sage to a purple hue,

That's when the call of the range comes strong,
When waddies who've wandered away long hence
Heed the wish of their homesick hearts
To tie up their nags at the home-ranch fence.

But whether it's moonlight, sunset or dawn,
If you are a rider of that wild clan,
It will bring you home, 'cause, shucks, that call
Is always strong in a range-bred man.

JAWS OF JUSTICE

By Grace E. Parr—Age 23
Wellington, Nevada

Jim Marshall sat his bronco proud
As o'er the sagebrush flat it pranced.
A gun shot rang out clear an' loud.
The slug acrost his forehead glanced.

'Twas Dead-eye Dick who'd made the draw
A-comin' from a boulder's shadder.
"Git off thet hoss! Thar ain't no law
In Coyote County o' Nevadder!"

Jim Marshall swung down off his mount
With nary sign of qualm nor quiver.
Dick trussed him up, 'cause law don't count,
Then chucked him in the river.

It seemed like Jim would live no more,
A-driftin' down with weed an' moss.
Who picked him up to lay ashore?
None other than his smart ol' hoss!

The bronco's teeth cut rope an' knot.
Jim jumped his outlaw, tooth an' nail.
Up by the boulder was the spot.
He marched thet hombre back to jail.

COWBOY'S HOME SWEET HOME

By Hazel McDonald—Age 19
Vernonia, Oregon

The weeds have growed up
'Round my old cabin door,
And cobwebs are hanging
From the top to the floor.

The windows were broken,
But I have them all mended
With some old cowhide
That my pard recommended.

The old cookstove's rusty,
And wabbly its pegs.
But it has to stand up
'Cause its got wooden legs.

The bed ain't much to look at—
Has a sag in the middle.
But to my pard and me
It's as fit as a fiddle.

It don't sound like much
To you fine city folks,
But it's home sweet home
To us cowpokes.

"Gosh," says Pole Pitkett when we're gittin' up to stomp out, "yuh goin' to quit so soon? I was jest a-gittin' het up, jedgin' them amachoors. I shore likes it."

Johnny Forty-five pipes up:

"So do we all, I reckon, Pole,
When our dinero's sleek.
But if we spend it all tonight,
We won't have none next week."

"An' we better have some next week, waddies," we horns in. "It'll be Juniors' Night then."

"Hooray!" hollers Pecos Wilson. "It better be good, too, 'cause the last un shore was a pay-off to the younkers sixteen year old or under."

We ain't worryin' 'bout thet, though, so it's up to yuh younkers to prove we ain't overratin' yuh. See yuh next week! Yuh older uns is invited to come an' look on, 'cause week after thet, it'll be yore round-up ag'in. THE RANGE BOSS.

Comin' next week! "A Hang Noose Waits In Texas," by Ed Earl Repp. Fast action an' trigger dynamite in a complete feature novelette. Those gun-totin' Lone Star hellions, led by Rome Clarey, rode a trail of bullet death to bring new life to a blood-scourged clan of Texans. Don't miss this bull's-eye story of range adventure! In the same issue: "Lobo Branded," by T. W. Ford. A complete novelette of Solo Strant, the famous Silver Kid. When his flamin' six-guns laid their mark on a man it meant only one thing—sudden doom. Also stories of Bud Jones and Kiowa Kenyon, by J. Allan Dunn, Tie-down Johnny, by William F. Bragg, Pecos Wilson, and other high-speed Western characters. Order in advance from your newsdealer. 10 cents a copy.

Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral

This department is for the purpose of preserving the old cowboy songs and Western range ballads, and their history. Readers can help in this work by sending in any such songs that they know, especially those handed down by word of mouth by parents, grandparents, and other old-time Westerners. The story of the song, how it came to be written, and the facts on which it is based should accompany the words whenever possible.

Address all letters to Fiddlin' Joe, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

HOWDY, folks! Come on in an' join the Corrallers.

Remember, this department is yores. We're not only tryin' to find the ol' Western songs an' ballads thet yuh want to know—but we're here to receive songs from *you*, songs thet yore grandparents used tuh tell yuh of, fer instance. In other words, as this hyar department increases in value as a collectin' agency fer the real ol-time songs, it ought to be you folks who kin take the credit.

Every genuine cowboy song thet comes in from a reader is worth dozens o' songs thet I might find in books an' such—fer each song thet one of you sends in means thet thar's one more reader who's takin' the trouble tuh keep on the lookout fer songs fer the Corral—one more reader who's become a real deputy song-collector fer yores truly!

Speakin' of songs thet yore grandparents used tuh sing tuh you, hyar's a letter from Mrs. Hapeman, of Pennsylvania, which we're mighty glad to publish.

"I am sending you a song that I can remember my old grandmother singing. Who it's by I don't know. Or any of its history. It has a very pretty tune—something like 'The Fatal Wedding,' and I am sure we all know that tune."

The song she sends is a version of "The Dying Ranger," a real ol' song, folks, thet yuh ought tuh have in yore scrapbooks.

THE DYING RANGER

The sun was setting in the west
And filled with a lingering ray
The branches of a forest
Where a wounded ranger lay,
In the shade of a palmetto
'Neath the summer's sultry sky,
Far away from his home in Texas,
As they laid him down to die.

A group had gathered round him,
His comrades in the fight.
The tears rolled down each manly cheek
As he bade his last good night.
One tried and true companion
Was kneeling by his side,
To stop his life blood flowing,
But all in vain he tried.

When in despair and anguish
He saw it was in vain,
While down his loved companion's face
The tears poured out like rain,
Up spoke the dying ranger:
"Boys, do not weep for me;
I'm crossing the dark river
To a country that is free.

"Draw nearer to me, comrades,
And listen to what I say,
I'm going to tell a story
As my spirit hastens away.
Way back in northwest Texas,
That good old Lone Star State,
There is one who for my coming
With an anxious heart will wait.

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"A little girl, my sister,
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I've loved her as a brother,
And with a brother's care
I've tried through grief and sorrow
Her little heart to cheer.

"Our country was invaded.
They called for volunteers.
She threw her arms about me,
And bursting into tears,
Saying: 'Go, my darling brother,
Drive the traitors from our shore;
My heart may need your presence,
But our country needs you more.'

" 'Tis true I love my country,
To it I've given all:
If it was not for my sister, boys,
I'd be content to fall.
Oh, comrades, I am dying;
She'll never see me more,
Though she'll vainly wait my coming
By our little cabin door.

"My mother she lies sleeping
Beneath the churchyard sod,
And many a day has passed away
Since her spirit went to God.
My father, he lies sleeping
Beneath the deep blue sea:
We have no other kindred,
There's only Nell and me.

"Draw nearer to me, comrades,
Listen to my dying prayer:
Who'll be to her a brother,
And protect her with his care?"
Up spoke those noble rangers,
They answered one and all:
"We'll be to her a brother
Till the last of us does fall!"

One happy smile of pleasure
O'er the ranger's face was spread,
One dark convulsive shudder,
And the ranger boy was dead.
Far from his darling sister
They laid him down to rest,
With his saddle for a pillow
And his rifle across his breast.

Our ol' friend, Mr. John Lomax, has this song in his collection of cowboy songs, in a slightly different version. Next week I'm goin' to give yuh a song thet the cowboys made up from the ol' sea ballad called "The Ocean Burial" to fit thar own way of life on the plains. So long an' good luck!

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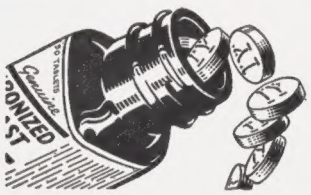

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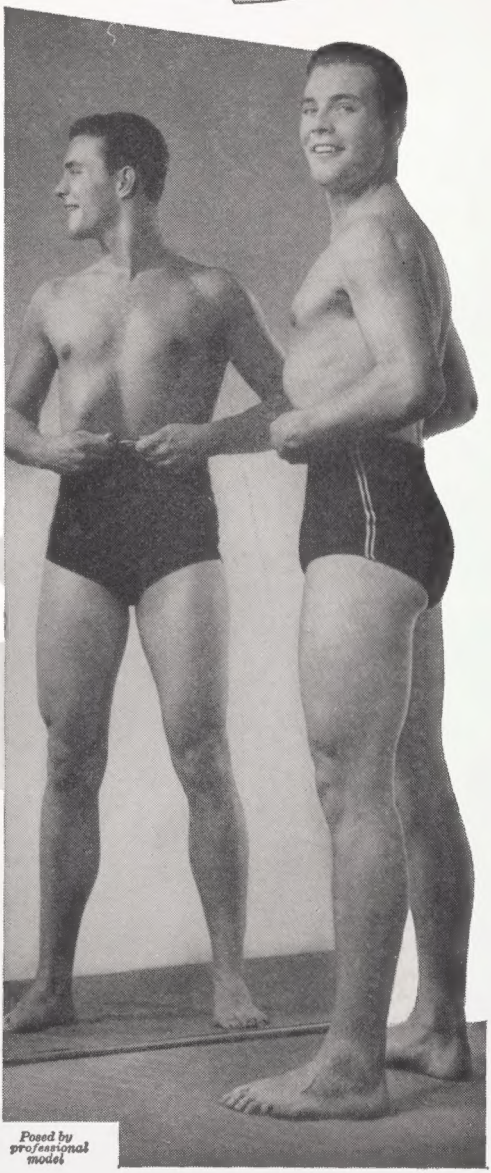

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St. Cloud, Minn.
Henderson, N. C.
Orangeburg, S. C.
Ft. Collins, Colo.
Jamestown, N. Y.
Phoenixville, Pa.
Bloomington, Ind.
Worcester, Mass.
East Chicago, Ind.
Mingo Jct., Ohio
Okmulgee, Okla.
E. Lansing, Mich.
Buena Vista, Col.
Great Bend, Kans.
Schenectady, N. Y.
Livingston, Mont.
Wilkes Barre, Pa.
Greencastle, Ind.
Centralia, Wash.
McAlester, Okla.
Negaunee, Mich.
Crown Point, Ind.
Stillwater, Okla.
Drumright, Okla.
Baton Rouge, La.
New Iberia, La.
Aberdeen, S. D.
Ada, Okla.
Booker, Tex.
Jessup, Md.

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